THE FAITHFUL WIFE

By the Same Author

KRISTIN LAVRANSDATTER

COMPOSED OF THREE BOOKS

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The Mistress of Husaby
The Cross

THE MASTER OF HESTVIKEN

COMPOSED OF FOUR BOOKS

The Axe
The Snake Pit
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JENNY
THE BURNING BUSH
THE WILD ORCHID
STAGES ON THE ROAD
THE LONGEST YEARS
GUNNAR'S DAUGHTER

THE FAITHFUL WIFE

By

SIGRID UNDSET

Translated by

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CHAPTER ONE

NATHALIE threw a handful of morels into the colander and held it down in the saucepan of boiling water; as she did so she heard Sigurd letting himself in at the hall door. For an instant she waited, listening. He hung up his coat and hat, then went straight into his own room.

The smell of the scalded fungus brought a vision of woodland paths—a tangle of worn roots and a carpet of withered pine-needles. They must really manage to get up to their old morel grounds again this year, before it was too late. This winter and spring something had nearly always come in the way when she and Sigurd had planned a Sunday walk—such a bore! Nathalie thought of the white gauze spread over dry twigs and withered bracken as soon as the snow had left them—and of the murmur in the spruces on a spring day when the sky is full of clouds tearing before the wind—and of the gently stirring lichen, tangled and streaked with black. And were the sky ever so cloudy, if but a few little gleams of sunshine filtered through, it was enough to bring out a swarm over all the ant-hills, like a kind of metal cloth made up of tiny heaving copper beads. Sigurd always laughed at her for calling them ant's houses—at least, he had done so at first. Now he seemed not to notice it any more—in fact, he sometimes said ant's houses himself.

Nathalie turned the parboiled morels out on to a cloth and put another handful into the colander. The smell of them was so good that she almost wished they could have had supper here in the kitchen. It made her think of those kitchens with a corner set apart for taking meals which she had looked at when they were thinking of buying a new apartment. Well, she didn't regret their not having bought one—in reality the new little apartments were unpractical, most of them at any rate, and dull. She wondered whether in a few years this "functionalist" style would not seem as much out-of-date as the "Jugend" style did now. At one time *that* was the new thing and all the young people were mad about it because it expressed *their* sentiments. Houses *had* to look like rocks or heaps of stones and have towers like pepper-boxes and vinegar bottles, and indoors they were all wavy lines and conventionalized aquatic plants. Nowadays nothing was so hideous as that whole period.

She did not allow it to reach the surface of her consciousness that she was no longer so happy as when she came home looking forward to treating Sigurd to a mushroom omelet for supper. She had always thought it narrow-minded if a wife got it into her head that her husband was absolutely bound to go through some ritual of attention every time he went out or came home. But Sigurd might have noticed what a fine smell there was in the kitchen just now. . . .

—All the same she had never seen such masses of morels as in Österdal when they went through it to his home as a newly-married couple. Of course spring came much later up there—a whole month later. It was nearly a month to their wedding-day. Then they would have been married sixteen years.

They would never have been able to have so much space in one of the new houses, not at the same price. And then sound carried so distinctly in them, so everybody complained. She found this old-fashioned kitchen of hers so cosy and comfortable, though it was chiefly for the sake of teasing Sverre that she made this assertion. Comfortable it was not; it seemed even narrower than it was because of its height, with one tall, narrow window looking on to the backyard. It was dark—having it repainted a year or two ago hadn't made much difference. She had chosen the colours from her recollection of Fardal parsonage: pale bluish green walls, dark rust-red shelves and cupboards—but it could not be denied that the effect was not the same here. It didn't matter. Sigurd didn't think it was at all comfortable to take your meals in the kitchen—not in town kitchens, he said. But she liked her kitchen—to have to herself and work in. She had all the curious old things from grandmother's kitchen here: the brass mortar and plates with a brown pattern and the copper pudding-shape in the form of a fish. The handsome fire-proof china she had brought home from Sweden—that was the summer she and Sigurd stayed at Båstad. They had had such a lovely time there—it was pleasant to think of it.

She was just breaking the eggs for the omelet when Sigurd appeared at the door: "I say, Thali, will it be long before we get something to eat?"

He had changed into his blue suit.

"No, why? Are you going out this evening? I came across such nice morels at Fru Ness's, so I thought I'd give a little extra treat."

"It's only that I've got to meet some people. From home. I tried to ring you. About half-past six, but they

said you'd left. And when I rang up here I didn't get any answer either, though I rang again later."

"No, I had some calls to make. At the account-book makers', and then I was at the dressmaker's. I got home three-quarters of an hour ago. It was a pity I didn't know you were going out——"

"Oh well, it doesn't matter. We didn't fix any particular time. I was to meet them at the hotel."

"Would you mind starting to lay the table for me?" she asked. "And slip a couple of plates into the oven here—we must have hot plates for the omelet. Doesn't it smell good?" She looked round with a laugh.

"Fine. But look here, we must have red wine with this—what?"

"O.K." Nathalie's voice brightened. "But then you'll have to get up another bottle for to-morrow."

Nathalie finished up in the kitchen. She had got in the way of moving about almost noiselessly—since the time when she used to get their breakfast ready before she went to business. And it was soothing too, since she worked all day long in the incessant noise from the workshops across the yard, with lorries rumbling in and out, shaking the whole house, and the street traffic—it had really increased enormously even in the twelve years "House and Home" had been established there.

She unpacked the cheese she had bought for the week-end. The gruyère was extra good—not that she cared much for gruyère, but it was Sigurd's favourite. She finished setting the tray, shifted the pan with the omelet to the small ring and put the kettle for washing-up on the biggest.

Finally she hung up her kitchen apron on the hook by the door and looked at herself in the glass. She gave her-

self a dab of powder, freshened up lips and eyebrows and put her hair straight, before taking up the tray and going into the dining-room.

Sigurd sat in the low leather chair with a paper in front of him. He had switched on the electric fire and its reflector threw a reddish light on him. He was so good-looking when she saw him like this, in profile; for it was the shape of his head that was so handsome—with the straight forehead and slightly curved nose, the strong, rounded chin and the mouth which had such a determined look when the lips were tightly closed as now. Seen from the side you didn't notice so much that his cheeks had grown rather smooth and fleshy—for that matter she didn't think it was unbecoming if Sigurd was getting a little more brawny; at any rate it hadn't gone far enough yet to make any difference. Probably he ought to keep an eye on his weight—but at present his figure was as shapely as it could be. And if his hair had turned white at the temples, that only gave him a more refined look in a way—he was so fair that strangers probably never even noticed it.

Nathalie cast an eye over the table. When Sigurd helped her to lay it she knew he wouldn't remember much of what ought to be there. With a faint smile she supplemented it with bread-platter, butter-knives, forks for serving, teaspoons, salt and pepper—and mustard, of course; Sigurd wanted mustard with the cheese. "Well, now, we're ready——"

"You'll enjoy meeting people from your part of the world. Who is it, by the way—anybody I know?"

"Gaarder's his name; I don't know whether you remember him. He came to see us at Rafstad once or twice. You couldn't bear him, I remember. But now he hangs

out somewhere up in Indsherred. Seems to have quite a good practice as far as I can make out. But I don't know how far he's in touch with any of the people at home—as a matter of fact I know him very slightly."

"What is he, by the way—'practice' you said?"

"Doctor." Nathalie looked at her husband in surprise—he said it in such a queerly curt way. "There'll be some others there—mutual acquaintances, you know."

"Well, then you'll have quite a good time——"

"Sure. *Skaal*, wife! That was a great omelet. By the bye, have you made any plans for to-morrow, Thali?"

She shook her head. Usually, if they had made no arrangements for Sunday, it was tacitly agreed that they would take an easy morning and breakfast late. And at the breakfast-table they discussed what to do with themselves for the rest of the day.

"I mean, in case these people should propose anything. Of course they have cars, most of them. I didn't know if you might have arranged something with Hildur for instance?"

"Oh no. I'm free all day."

Sigurd seemed rather thoughtful.

"I didn't mean *that* exactly—to suggest that you should come too in case we go anywhere. To tell the truth I don't believe you'd feel altogether at home with them . . ."

"Oh—I'm not so hard to please as all that, am I?"

"You?" He gave a little laugh. "And I can't say it's much fun for me when I've got you to join in something that obviously doesn't amuse you——"

"Look here now! You can't say I *show* it even if I'm not wildly enthusiastic about the people I'm with."

"Wasn't it Queen Victoria who was always saying: 'We are not amused?' You look exactly like her."

"What nonsense you talk, Sigurd. In the first place Queen Victoria was a stout old——"

"——and you are young and slight and pretty, I know that. But all the same, when you sit like that, calm and polite and sweet, with that queenly expression of yours——"

"In other words"—Nathalie herself was aware that this bright and cheerful ring in her voice sounded a little artificial—"you would rather not take your wives with you if you decide on anything for to-morrow——"

"Well, as far as that goes, Gaarder's cousin *is* going to bring his wife. That's just the point. You'd think her gruesome." He laughed aloud. "And so she is for that matter. The type that makes a row with the waiters over the bill and abuses her husband before the whole company. But inclined to be terribly amiable with any other man but the poor wretch who has fallen into her clutches—and those they owe money to. Brrr——!" He shivered in his clothes.

"Poor you. It's an awful look out for your Sunday's enjoyment."

"Not a bit. You can understand, the rest of us will get on all right. But you see, if you came you'd have the lady on your hands—most of the time anyhow."

"And you don't wish me such a fate as that. *Skaal* then! You didn't remember by any chance to get up that red wine?"

"God's truth! I forgot——"

"Ah, but you're not going to wriggle out of that, my boy!" She was talking all the time in her bright and merry tone. "You know very well I daren't go into the

cellar after dark for anything—I'm so afraid of rats and cats and horrid men——"

"All right!" He came across and gave her a smacking kiss. "Thanks for the supper, wife—it was a banquet!" He made for the door.

Nathalie cleared the table, rather exhilarated by the unexpected kiss. It had been the regular thing in her home for her father to kiss her mother with thanks for the meal, and the first time Sigurd visited them he couldn't help showing that it struck him as an odd custom. That was why he sometimes gave her a kiss of thanks when he was in the mood to rag her a little. Perhaps too he would rather have stayed at home this evening.

"But now I must fly—oh, be an angel and ring up a taxi for me." He put away the bottles of wine in the corner cupboard, gave her half an embrace and a kiss on his way to the hall. A moment later he put his head into the room again:

"'Bye, Thali—oh, by the way, I brought you some sweets—they're on the hall table. And don't wait up for me—I'm afraid it'll be a late affair—and I may not arrive in the best of form. Well, good night, Thali—so long——"

Nathalie took plenty of time over her little washing up. She tidied the kitchen, carried in the things that belonged to the dining-room and put them back in the corner cupboard and on the sideboard. Then she went into Sigurd's room—he always threw his things all over the place when changing. Nathalie cleaned up after him in the bedroom and bathroom; but after that there was nothing more for her to do.

That is, of course, there were plenty of things she might turn to. She ought to write to her mother—or to Ragna. And she had a good deal of needlework on hand. And there was a pile of books that she had thought of reading. She had scarcely had time to look at the Saturday papers. But she didn't feel inclined to start on anything.

She carried the electric fire into the drawing-room—it wasn't at all warm in the evenings. With the big reflector which threw an orange light over the carpet it reminded her of steamships. No doubt this was because it had a grating of metal rods in front of the reflector, as on ships' lanterns. Sigurd said it was a pattern that hadn't caught on very well; they didn't stock it any longer. But she was fond of this fire. Her idea for the summer was that they should go somewhere by boat. Neither of them had yet seen the Hardanger fjord for instance, or the Sogne fjord. In fact they knew very little of the West Country. And Sigurd had enjoyed their trip to the North Cape so much—he was fond of travelling by steamer.

If only they could take their holiday at the same time. It might not be a bad thing to take it independently sometimes—a little separation now and then was certainly good for one. And she had had quite a good time in Copenhagen last year—a good deal of profit too from the exhibitions she saw there. But all the same—it was true that she was not a great hand at making new acquaintances—Sigurd was right in saying she was perhaps rather retiring. And they always had such a lovely time when they travelled together. This year she ought no doubt to pay a visit at home. Sixty-eight was of course no age to speak of, but Ragna constantly wrote that mamma had failed a great deal latterly. What if she went home

Mannie. For Girlie she thought of using jade green, or perhaps blue. They were to be charming anyhow. But she had to light the lamp.

She had ordered the tall standard lamp which stood behind the head of the divan from a young carver who had exhibited in their showrooms one time. And the shade she had bought at Wertheim's. Presumably the sheets of parchment had never belonged to any ancient ecclesiastical manuscript, they were just a good imitation to be used as lamp-shades and the like. But the gilt and coloured borders and the lines and musical notation in black and red made a pretty pattern on the yellow translucent parchment. And in buying it she had yielded to a little secret sentimentality—she liked to think that the sheets of an old missal cast their shadow over their bed. Sigurd always wanted to have the lamp alight. And to her the sacred thing in life was that Sigurd and she loved one another.

When they lived in the little apartment next door they had always promised themselves that when they could afford it they would each have a room of their own which they could arrange according to their own ideas, and then they could have the dining-room as common ground. When it came to the point, Sigurd chose the little room that looked on to the yard and furnished it in quite an ordinary way, with a good old-fashioned iron bedstead, a chest of drawers and a wardrobe and a regular capacious washing-stand. So she took the veranda-room, and that served at the same time as their drawing-room. She had used the little maid's room as a dressing-room until they put in a bath a couple of years ago. So long as she saw to their breakfast herself it was a practical arrangement that she could dress while keeping an eye

on the coffee kettle and the porridge saucepan and so on.

At times she regretted those days. Though she knew very well that she wouldn't be at all pleased to have to content herself again with nothing but a charwoman for the heavy work. She had now accustomed herself to having a domestic help who came every morning and stayed till the dinner was washed up. Poor Sigurd, it wasn't his fault that he had got into the way of taking things rather easily. When they were first married he had been keen on their sticking to their agreement—he insisted on taking his week for getting the breakfast and doing the housework. But she had thought it such fun to coddle Sigurd and play with the work. She had done all she could to spoil him. Now that the maid's room was available, Sigurd had often suggested that they ought to have a maid living in. But she didn't quite like the idea. For she knew that if she once handed over the supper to another person there would be an end of the little luxuries which she could prepare when they were by themselves—and they were both so fond of these. With them the last trace of a newly-married feeling would fade out of their existence.

There was a ring at the bell. With a little thrill of expectation Nathalie got up and went to the door. In a way it was delightful to have an evening alone now and again. But she wouldn't mind if somebody came now, with whom she could have a cosy chat.

——And then it was only Sonja. Yes, of course, she had left her umbrella behind when they were here last week. "I was passing anyhow, and then I saw a light in your window——"

"Well, but come in, won't you? It was nice of you to come up——"

Nathalie never felt she had anything she wanted to say to this sister-in-law. That she disliked her would be saying too much—but among other things Sonja was eleven years younger than herself. Sigurd really thought so badly of her at first—when she was only nineteen and seemed quite attractive and sweet. But then Sigurd had been opposed to the whole affair, as he believed all the time that Asmund's first wife might recover. And later on he had found much to object to in Sonja. For one thing she was an incorrigible nightbird—when she didn't go out she got people to come round, and if by any chance she and Asmund had an evening to themselves she never went to bed till long after midnight. That was all very well for her, she didn't get up in any case till pretty late in the morning, but Asmund had to be at his office at a regular hour. And besides, Sonja was always tired and cross next day; she didn't really come to life till the evening. She smoked far too much—and she liked a good deal to drink, though she had no head for it. But it was particularly bad for the children—Sonja was irritable, she scolded and slapped them, but let them do just as they liked in the end, or at any rate that was how they behaved. Maiken and Gary were skinny and nervous and the worst brought-up youngsters imaginable. It was certainly better to have no children, Sigurd said, than such unhealthy and ill-behaved creatures as these.

"But I say, how charming!" said Sonja, as Nathalie came in with the coffee-tray. She had discovered Nathalie's knitting, and of course she thought it must be for Gary—the T might very well stand for Torgal. "But isn't it awfully big?"

"No, I don't think so. It's for Thomas, Ragna's boy, you know."

"Oh now——" It had always irritated Nathalie to hear Sonja say "oh now" and one or two other things of the same sort. In the ordinary way she affected an out-and-out slangy style, but this must have been something that had stuck to her from her childhood—her mother had made the most desperate efforts to "talk genteelly." Indeed poor Sonja had had a pretty awful home. The father was a hopeless ne'er-do-well who spent his whole time pitying himself for having made such a *mésalliance* with a chambermaid from a third-rate hotel in a small town. He complained of his grand family who would do nothing for him and reproached his wife for being the cause of his falling out with them. Fru Ulbricht was common, and it could be seen that she was fond of the bottle. Gustav, Sonja's eldest brother, had been born before she met Ulbricht, and he was the best of her children—Molla too, the youngest, was quite a good sort, and probably she wasn't an Ulbricht either. Certainly nobody would blame her for failing to be extravagantly faithful to her wet rag of a husband; but she carried her infidelity a little too far as time went on. In other ways she had been wonderfully good to her husband; she had coddled him and taken good care of him and the children. She was industrious and extraordinarily capable; her home-made cakes had been worked up into a regular business. And she was kind—this was a fact that Nathalie had discovered even as a little girl, when her mother left the children so much to her servants: the flightiest are often very kind. Not always, of course; far from it—poor Sonja unfortunately did not take after her mother either in capability or in caring for the bodily welfare of any one. But then it could not be said that her flightiness was of the positive kind, like her mother's—

it was more like her father's, the result of her lacking a number of qualities. Sonja was certainly fond of her mother, but ashamed of her at the same time—she could not bear her father and despised him, but held on to his family as tightly as she could and was fond of telling people that she had been brought up by her grandfather, Lieutenant-Colonel Ulbricht, that William Ulbricht was her cousin and Elizabeth Ulbricht her aunt, and so on. She had lived at the old Ulbrichts' the year she was at the commercial college.

"I was so surprised to see a light in your window, because Sigurd was talking to Asmund on the telephone about midday and he said you were going out with some friends from the country this evening and wouldn't be back till late. You see, we wanted to get you to come for a motor run to-morrow."

"Well no, it was some people I hardly know at all. Sigurd couldn't very well get out of it, but I didn't think I need go——"

"Fancy that! you didn't really want to? I heard they were going to be quite a big party—young people too. Going out to somebody's villa to dance——"

Nathalie refilled Sonja's liqueur glass. "You know, I don't care so much for that sort of thing. When there are a lot of people, and nobody I know really well——"

"But you know Sverre Reistad well—your faithful admirer."

Nathalie couldn't tell why she didn't like hearing this. It was a little strange that Sigurd hadn't said anything about Sverre being one of the party. "Oh, Sverre"—she smiled slyly—"he probably has his hands full just now—with someone much younger and prettier. So I don't

think he would have been overjoyed to have to dance attendance on me again."

"Come off it! You could have found somebody to take his place, I'm sure—you're pretty enough still. So that's it—I suppose it's Adinda Gaarder that Reistad's sweet on now———?"

"Is that her name?" laughed Nathalie. "I only know there is one. They're always together." At the moment she scarcely remembered that this about Sverre's flame was a thing she had invented off-hand.

"Quite pretty, isn't she? Fair. No chicken—but she seems to have any amount of sex appeal, though to my mind she looks devastatingly dull. I thought by the way that Sigurd had a mild flirtation with her—quite innocently of course. She goes about in a bluish green coat and skirt——?"

"I can't say I've noticed what she wears. What did you say her name was?"

"Adinda Gaarder."

"Is she married to the Gaarder who has a fish and game business here, somewhere along the Frogner road?"

"You're crazy! Why, she passed her matric last year, I think it was. She isn't married—her father has a farm somewhere up country, I believe." Sonja laughed. "So you needn't be too sure your dear friend Sverre won't go and get married one fine day, if it's her he's after now."

"Well, but that would be splendid. That is, if the girl's the right sort. I've always wished that Sverre could find a nice wife. He's just the right kind to have a home and a family of his own. *Skaal*, Sonja!"

"Are we to drink to Sverre's matrimonial prospects, do you mean? Then aren't you just a little bit jealous,

Thali? There'll be no more orchids and rare cactuses for you, you know——"

"Oh—if Fru Sverre isn't of a jealous nature we can go on talking cactus and exchanging cuttings and comparing notes as we have done. Seriously, I am very fond of Sverre, let me tell you; I honestly wish he could get a pretty and sensible young wife who could make him really happy. He deserves it."

"Ah well, you're comfortably settled," sighed Sonja. "So *you* can afford to be noble. Other poor folks have to take better care of their admirers if they want to have any fun in the springtime of their youth."

"Oh well——" Nathalie didn't know what to say. She always felt rather awkward when Sonja spoke quite unblushingly of how she cultivated friends of both sexes for the sake of the advantages she thought they might bring her.

"It's all very well for you, Thali. You make stacks of money yourself—what's more, you have an important position and you're always being interviewed and having your portrait in the papers——"

"Oh, only once, Sonja! When we had our silver jubilee last year."

"Why, but you were in the paper that time you were showing Norwegian linen—and when that potter from Trondhjem came here."

"Yes, I was there, modestly in the background." Nathalie laughed. "But all the same I can't see anything wonderful in getting oneself into the papers."

"Gee, I don't know what I wouldn't do if only I could be interviewed and see my picture in the papers—but I never shall. I shall never be anything but just an ordinary little housewife——"

"Now you've taken to driving the car yourself you'd better take care *that* doesn't get you into the papers."

"Yes, of course you laugh at me. I know very well you think I'm silly, Thali. And so I am, I know it myself——"

"I don't know anything of the sort, Sonja—even if you don't always act very wisely, that doesn't prove that you're silly."

"Yes, I know you think so," said Sonja bitterly. "Just as if it was a crime to want to be young and have a bit of fun, simply because one is married and has a couple of children. It's all right for you to talk—I'm really as fond of my children as any one can be, but you ought to know what a job it is looking after kids—so difficult. Especially nowadays when you read and hear so much about how dangerous and difficult it is to bring them up so they don't get complexes and wrong food and all that. But that's how it always is. Old maids' children are little angels, Grandmother Ulbricht always used to say—in her time it was only old maids who didn't have any children, but now there don't seem to be any old maids left, only childless married women and girls, and they can tell you how everything ought to be. Why don't you people get some children of your own, if you think they're so nice? I didn't have any young days, I was married straight out of school, to Asmund who was nearly twice my age——"

Nobody forced you to it, little Sonja. You got married because you preferred that to having to look for a job. But Nathalie said nothing.

"Oh, yes—Asmund's a splendid fellow, I know that very well! But let me tell you, it *isn't* quite the same thing being married, when you have to ask your husband for every penny you spend. And that's something you don't

know about. It's easy enough for Sigurd to be pleasant with you always and to do the thing well when you go out together and to remember to bring you home presents and chocolate——"

"That reminds me." Nathalie got up with a laugh, went out to the hall and found the big flat parcel on the table. " 'I brought you a few sweets, they're out in the hall,' Sigurd said—he put his head in at the door just as he was going; I expect he'd forgotten all about them. So if I wanted to be so frightfully particular about Sigurd always remembering these little attentions——"

"There, you can just see!" Sonja was laughing too, as she dug into the box to find her favourite flavours. " 'There's some sweets for you in the hall,' says Sigurd in his off-hand way, when he's bought you a couple of pounds of the dearest sort. On the rare occasions when Asmund brings me anything good he asks me at every bite I take, 'isn't it delicious?' and 'let the kiddies have a taste' and then he tells me how much it cost and where he bought it and all the rest—ugh!"

"Most likely he's been looking forward to giving it you." Asmund was always in difficulties about money. Twice at least in the last few years Sigurd had had to raise a biggish sum in a hurry, and Nathalie had guessed it was for his brother, though they had never talked about it directly. Among other things Asmund must have spent far too much on that house——

She began to long for Sonja to go—after a while it was very tiring to have her by herself. She discoursed at great length about people whom Nathalie knew very slightly or not at all—and kept returning to her favourite subject, the difficulties of her own position. At the same time Nathalie espied a ray of hope: if Sonja stayed as

long as she was in the habit of doing, perhaps Sigurd would be home before she left. It was nearly three o'clock when at last Sonja got up to go, and that was only because they had run out of cigarettes. Nathalie took care not to disclose that she had a few in her hand-bag—just enough for to-morrow morning.

She went downstairs to let her sister-in-law out. It was a near thing that Sonja didn't forget her umbrella again. She was slightly fuddled—Nathalie had had to get out the sherry she had by her. "You mustn't think I'd do anything wrong, Thali—you don't think that of me, do you? Really and truly I'm so terribly fond of you—terribly fond of you—I do so want someone to be kind to me, I must tell you—for being married to Asmund's not the easy job you all think it is—no, I can tell you it's not! For you see, I feel so young—but that's what he can't understand. Ooh, it's so ghastly to think that here I am, thirty already, and it doesn't look as if I should ever get a chance of being a young woman—you must be kind to me, Thali—you must! And you needn't think I'm drunk because I say all these things to you."

"No, no, my dear, the little drop I gave you couldn't hurt anybody. Well, well, Sonja—I'm sure I never had a thought of being unkind to you. But let go of my arm, this door's rather hard to open."

There had been a touch of frost, enough to stiffen the mud which gave under her feet as she walked with Sonja through the little front garden. In the yellow light of the gas-lamp the lilac-bushes were beaded with buds. The spiræa hedge was out, its green leaves shed an acrid smell in the clear, cold night air.

"Good night, good night, and thanks for coming round. My love to them——" The driver banged the

door of the taxi. Nathalie stood for a while in the street after they had driven off.

It was fairly light already, with the faint blue of dawn in the sky and a few pale stars high above the house-tops. In two windows of the house opposite lights were still burning behind brown blinds. Otherwise the morning-grey house-fronts seemed asleep, with a pale reflection of the brightening sky in their windows. The houses stood rather higher on the other side of the street; they were old-fashioned three-storied villas with leafless creepers winding round the iron pillars of their verandas. Their front gardens sloped downwards, the grass white with hoar-frost. They had lived in this street ever since they were married.

Footsteps rang clearly, though deadened, on the pavement of Bogstad road, but they were going in the direction of town. It was perfectly still, and sounds carried far. A long way off a car could be heard, but it was not coming here. Nathalie went in and locked the street-door.

The air of her room was so thick with tobacco smoke that it would not do to go to bed for at least half an hour. Nathalie opened the veranda door wide, emptied the brimful ashtrays into the stove, carried out glasses and plates. On returning to the room she began slowly to arrange the divan for the night.

Inside lay clean sheets and pillow-cases. Nathalie thought for a moment—yes, of course, they would have the washerwoman on Monday. So Vera must have taken off the soiled sheets and laid them in soak. One by one Nathalie took the four cushions out of their daytime covers and slipped them into the smooth cool linen pillow-cases. If she left the veranda door open till she

had finished undressing the bed would be lovely and cold to get into.

By the strong light in the bathroom she studied her appearance with unwonted attention, as she fixed the wavers in her golden brown hair for the night. She would soon have to pay another visit to the hairdresser's, she could see. She had never quite made up her mind whether she hadn't done a stupid thing in giving her hair a lighter shade. As the fashion was when she was a girl, her nearly black hair had gone well with her light grey eyes and white skin—it gave the regularity of her long, narrow face a certain madonna-like air when she parted her hair over the forehead and wore those clusters of loose little curls over her ears. But now, if only for business reasons, she was compelled to look like other people. And on discovering the first grey hairs she had had it dyed golden brown and cut short. Grey hairs show so terribly when one is dark. Though streaks of grey and black like Aunt Nanna's for instance gave a fine iron-grey effect. But even Aunt Nanna must have done something to her hair as long as her husband was alive—at any rate she didn't begin to show any grey till after his death. When she herself grew older she would wish to look like Aunt Nanna—Nanna was a handsome woman.

She honestly thought she could say for herself that she had worn well. Strange—when she didn't happen to be looking at herself in a glass she always imagined herself as she used to be when a girl. Apart from the small amount of make-up she was bound to use, since nowadays one has to look fresh and youthful when one has a job that involves constantly meeting strangers. She hadn't changed so very much either—only a little paler. Slightly faded—she could see that herself.

stay where he was as ring for another car to take him home.

"Oh, not anxious exactly. But you know, one sees so much in the papers every day—— Anyhow, it's good to know you're alive——"

CHAPTER TWO

ON the following Friday Sigurd rang her up at her office saying that unfortunately he was again prevented from coming home to dinner, "but I shall certainly be in to supper. I may be rather late, but you can count on my coming. So if you don't mind waiting supper for me I shall be glad."

Something in the tone of his voice had comforted Nathalie. She had guessed that he had worries of some sort these days—and he had been at home very little this week. But as he said nothing she would not ask questions. He generally told her about it afterwards—at any rate if it concerned his business. If it was something to do with Asmund, for instance, he would say very little about it. That was one of the things she liked best about Sigurd—from the very beginning of their acquaintance she had noticed that he never told stories about other people.

As she sat at home waiting for him that evening she said to herself that it might well be he had simply made up his mind to be left in peace for an evening. He had sounded so pleased on the telephone. But of course that didn't necessarily mean that he was finished with the business that had made him depressed and preoccupied.

But she saw it in his face the moment he came in—he had a look of relief. And he had brought her a big bunch

of blue iris—her favourite flower. Or one of them, for she had many.

"How gorgeous, Sigurd! What can I find to put them in, I wonder?"

"Shall I do it for you?" He arranged the flowers in the old copper vase. "Look here—don't you think they look well like that?" He placed the vase on the chest of drawers that stood out from the wall and formed the head end of the divan.

Nathalie smiled. "Dear——" She nestled up to him as he came across to kiss her. "They must have water, poor things——" She took the syringe and went out to fill it.

As they sat down to supper Sigurd asked:

"What do you say to our taking the express, up to Harestuen for instance? The snow's still in a good state up there, they say. Don't you think that was a good hotel we were at last winter?"

"I'm all for it."

Her husband got up and came behind her chair. He laid the palm of his hand against her neck and pressed it—then put the other hand under her chin and bent her head backwards, so as to look into her face: "Oh, my Thali——"

"What's come over you?" Nathalie looked up at him, a little frightened. "Is anything the matter, Sigurd?"

"I only wanted to look at you. There's nobody like you after all."

"Well, but sit down and eat your supper, boy." She laughed quietly, like a child looking forward to something.

Nathalie lay fondly fingering Sigurd's chest under his

pyjama jacket. He had such a fine smooth skin. "We ought to go to sleep now." But they lay there talking about their trip. He would have to take a taxi to the station the first thing with their skis and suit-cases, and then they were to meet and dine in town. They need not come back before the first train on Monday morning—Nathalie could quite well take a couple of hours off. "If only we have sunshine——"

She looked up at the blue flowers bending over their heads. "It's almost a pity—iris lasts such a short time. They'll be over by Monday."

"I'll bring you some more iris soon—if only I don't forget."

"Yes, but all the same it seems a sin to go away and leave your flowers. I'm so fond of anything you give me, let me tell you——"

Sigurd was ready to start next morning when the telephone rang. "It's a telegram—for you, Thali."

"Oh, won't you take it—you have time. There's something I've forgotten." A moment later he came out to her in the kitchen. "Heavens, Sigurd!—what is it?"

He held out the slip of paper to her. "It's from your sister. Bad news, I'm sorry to say——"

"It isn't—is it mamma——?"

"No, no." Vera, the maid, had instinctively left off what she was doing and looked at the two with interest. "It's about your father," said Sigurd quickly. "You'd better come in here," and he waved the slip of paper again.

Our trip, is it going to upset that? was her first thought as she followed him into the room.

"Poor Thali, this is bad news for you." She read the

message: "Father died suddenly heart attack yesterday evening. Come at once if you can. Ragna."

Papa. Papa was dead. She was incapable of feeling anything—could not believe that this was real. Sigurd seemed to be making an effort to find out what he ought to say or do now.

She had to suppress a prompting to laugh at him—and thought in desperation, what in the world is the matter with us! How is it I can't feel distressed—papa is dead, isn't he?

"My poor Thali, such a sad blow this is! And so unexpected. He looked so hale and hearty when they were here in the autumn. And your poor mother—this must be a terrible blow for her. I wander how she takes it——"

Mamma, yes, how did she take it? Dreadfully no doubt—she was always so impetuous in her feelings. The meaning of what was written on the slip of paper began to crystallize into reality in Nathalie's mind. Of course she must hurry home, as papa was dead. Poor mamma, she must be utterly distracted. Papa and mamma—they could never live without one another. She had never realized this fully until her marriage with Sigurd; those constant stormy scenes between them which had pained her so dreadfully while she lived at home as a child and a young woman—when mamma and papa had quarrelled, or disputed as they called it, till at last he dashed out slamming the door after him, and mamma was left exulting over having once more had the last word, and relieved at having found vent for her indignation over something or other—those scenes were their form of affection. It was not like her own form—but those two were happy together in that way. Oh, poor dear mamma, she would no longer have any papa to fight with.

A lump came into her throat, her eyes filled with tears—she felt with relief that grief had now come over her, good and warm. She longed to take her mother in her arms and comfort her, to be truly, fervently kind to her and papa. And now papa was dead—when she came home to him he would be lying still and dead, never again could she talk to him. Grieved to the heart, but resigned, since it could not have been otherwise, Nathalie felt how long it was since her old home had meant anything to her but a sort of background out of which her own life had grown. Each time she had written to her mother she had forgotten to ask for the paper to be sent—she had not received it since the new year, perhaps owing to some change in the office. Now it seemed like an act of unkindness to papa, her not having done so. But actually she had ceased long ago to take an interest in the news from home, and she hardly ever read papa's articles.

She wept quietly and soothingly on Sigurd's shoulder as he held her in his arms.

"Yes, this is a hard blow for you, my Thali, I know that. What do you think, shall I go there with you tonight?"

"I'm not sure whether that will suit them." She had a vague feeling that she ought first to meet them alone. Her whole being having become so entwined with Sigurd in the course of years made it necessary for her first to release herself from him and try to be merely the daughter returning to her own people—for a little while, so long as grief for the father just dead and for the home which was to be dissolved brought together all the scattered members of the family who had once been so closely united.

"We must talk to them first anyhow. We must get a

long-distance call at once. Ragna is sure to be at home—you had better ring her up there and not at Adlersborg."

"I shall ring up both places," said Sigurd decisively. He was ready for action now—her comfort and support, Nathalie guessed; and again the hysterical desire to laugh came over her. "I'd better speak to Mads too in any case. It's always a good thing on an occasion like this to get hold of a man."

When at last they sat in the taxi that evening, driving down to the quay, Nathalie could not deny that her chief feeling was one of well-being. But she was so tired. The whole day had been taken up with shopping and worries. She had arranged things so that she could be absent from the office till after the funeral, and had given Vera orders about the housekeeping. Both Mads and Ragna thought Sigurd ought not to come before the day of the funeral.

Papa had always said he wanted to be cremated, but Mads thought he had left nothing in writing to that effect. And mamma wanted to have the funeral at home. Heavens, how like her that was. At the crematorium it would only have been a middling affair, but at home there would be flags at half-mast everywhere and all the rest of it.

Sigurd had actually succeeded in getting hold of a copy of papa's paper when he came home to supper. There was a black border round the whole front page, and below a big black cross was the portrait of papa which he had approved as official, so to speak. Obituary by Sörbye, member of the Storting. The Dagblad also had a little portrait of papa. In the other papers there was only a paragraph saying that Editor Thomas von Westen

Söegaard was deceased at the age of seventy-three, and then some suitable phrases.

"Yes, I shall go below and turn in at once," Nathalie promised. "Yes, I'll ring you up every day. Well, good-bye now, till we meet again——"

And she fell asleep almost as soon as she had got into her berth.

When she came on deck next morning she saw they were already in the sound between Gaasoia and Fardal. How green it was here—the spring was much farther advanced than in the country round Oslo. She had quite forgotten how beautiful it was here at this season; the recognition brought a tender thrill to her bosom. She had not been home in springtime for—she didn't know how many years.

The sound lay in a dead calm, reflecting the brightness of the morning sky and the green shores from which the swallows swept out in their curving flight. The terns circled screeching over the low ridge of Gaasöia. At the water's edge white birds stood on boulders around which the golden mass of seaweed heaved almost imperceptibly.

Now she could see Fardal church. Against the dark wooded ridge which enclosed the district in a wide frame the bare trees of the church hill showed pale grey, with the whitewashed stone building on the summit, and a glimpse of the red outhouses of the parsonage. Behind it lay Long Water; but that cannot be seen from the sound, nor Gusslund either. She was reminded of the big hall at Gusslund where they always had to sleep, when they were invited to stay there a few days in summer. They used to think the four great four-post beds with starched white curtains all round them looked so dismally uncom-

Ragna had a mourning band on the sleeve of her grey walking dress, but Girlie was in a sky-blue knitted cloak and beret. But after all, it seemed to be no longer the custom to put children into mourning. A pity she had to wear those glasses. The sisters waved solemnly to each other, and Nathalie saw that Ragna was beginning to cry.

Mads appeared—as soon as the gangway was in position he came running up. "You've brought fine weather with you; had a good trip, haven't you? Are these yours, all these boxes?—you don't travel light!" Then it struck him that he ought to say something about what was in their minds. "A good thing you were able to come so quickly. Mother-in-law is dreadfully down, poor thing——"

The sister's embraced and kissed one another—rather awkwardly; such demonstrations of affection had never been a habit in the family. "I don't seem able to grasp it yet," said Nathalie truthfully. "To think that papa—he was so hearty when they came to see us in the autumn. Poor mamma, how does she take it? And how *is* she, Ragna? She's been in such bad health lately."

"Oh, that—why, it's just as if she'd forgotten all about it. Actually she's been perfectly well physically, since she has had all this to think about." They nodded to acquaintances on the quay as they hurried to Dr. Adler's car.

"But how big Girlie had grown." Sad that she's not better-looking, thought Nathalie. "Why, I almost think I shouldn't have known you again, Girlie!"

"Yes, don't you think she's shot up wonderfully this winter?"

They drove off. While listening to what her sister had to say Nathalie noted half-unconsciously the latest

changes in the familiar aspect of the street. It was Sunday of course—that accounted for the street being almost deserted in the morning sunshine. A few more of the old wooden houses had put in big plate-glass windows on the ground floor. A smart new motor coach, light green and yellow, came towards them. Solstrand—ah yes, that was the new boarding-house at Holmekilen, they had a coach running there now. Trader Giböen had started a filling-station. There was a new drinking-fountain in the church park——

"——you can't imagine how terrible it was; I *saw* it all, as I told you on the telephone; I was in the dining-room. Mamma raised a thousand objections of course, but the piece had had such a good reception, and then you know when any of the people from The Norse Theatre come here papa is always enthusiastic on principle and insists on our turning up in full force. But mamma had a pain here and a pain there and thought of a thousand things she had to do on that particular evening —she didn't want the bother of changing her dress, you understand. But then at last she says: 'Well, well, Thomas, you never give in till you've got what you want' —and that made him so happy! 'Now that was nice of you,' he said and went up and took her in his arms and said quite gaily: 'Up with you, wife, we haven't much time,' and with that I heard a crash and a rattling noise and poor mamma shrieked! I dashed in, and Margit had heard it right out in the kitchen and came flying, and we got him on to the sofa—fancy, Thali, I believe I knew *at once* what it was, but mamma *flung* herself upon him and *screamed* wildly: 'Oh, Thomas, Thomas, my dear, you aren't ill, are you?' Poor thing, she shrieked quite frantically, and Mads had that maternity case out at Ekenes

so I knew we couldn't get hold of him, and when Dr. Sæther came it was all over——"

Children in their Sunday best stood outside the newly-painted garden fences up on Morten's Hill. The Hill had always been such a pleasant quarter—they were decent people living there. The tidily kept beds in all the little gardens were bright with golden daffodils and bluebells. Transparent red and white tulips hung poised on their tall stalks, and the borders of sedum and periwinkle were so trim and green. As a child she had always envied those who lived in these neat old cottages—it looked as if they had such an orderly and peaceful existence.

The car stopped at their own garden gate. Nathalie felt a clutch at the heart as she looked at the reddish-brown wooden villa with all its verandas and dragons' heads. It looked as it always did, untidy and comfortless; it had not been re-painted for many a year; the lower part of the walls was grey with splashes of mud. Several bars were missing in the railing of the front-door steps. And through the open kitchen window one could see the dresser with its array of unwashed cups and jugs —as usual.

The front door opened at once and old Sönnichsen came down the steps. They met in the yard. "Nathalie!" He seized both her hands and began to pump them up and down. "Thank God you have come! Your poor mother, she is quite, quite shattered. Ah, your father—you may be sure there's many that feel *his* loss——" The tears began to pour from Sönnichsen's pale blue old man's eyes. "He looks so beautiful as he lies there—such peace there is upon him."

The garden had not yet been touched, Nathalie could see. White skeletons of last year's flowers lay plastered in

the crusted mould of the beds, and the new green shoots of weeds and perennials were peeping up through a mass of dead leaves and withered stalks. But the big forsythia bush at the corner of the house was thickly hung with lemon-yellow blooms. Nikolai had planted it when he was a boy and had taken such care of it. She had a sudden intense longing to see her brother— they were not sure when he would be able to come.

"You mustn't keep mamma waiting," Dr. Adler whispered, and Nathalie had to cut Sönnichsen short. He was telling her at some length how he was going to write some reminiscences of papa and had been in to get a photograph of him standing beside Björnstjerne Björnson —"you remember the time when Björnson was here, don't you——?"

"We were rather small then, you know, Sönnichsen. We were not allowed to come in to dinner. But I remember I went to hear the lecture."

"I say, you *must* come now," Mads reminded her impatiently.

Nathalie paused for a moment at the drawing-room door. The room was bathed in golden-brown light—the blinds were drawn on account of the morning sun, which produced a sort of under-water effect, with all the bluish-green plush of the furniture and portières. She felt as if she must pull herself together before plunging into it. Her mother rose from the corner sofa under the palms, broad and short in her black dress she came rowing across the room with her short thick arms. As they met she flung herself into her daughter's embrace. She just reached up to Nathalie's shoulder, and she fell to sobbing aloud with her bristly grey head resting against the other's breast.

Then they sat together on the sofa. Nathalie had hold of her mother's shoulder and patted her broad upper arm. "My poor little Mammy——"

"He was my all in all upon earth," Fru Söegaard lamented. "But thank God he had such an easy death. 'Little wifie'—those were the last words he spoke, Thali, and he patted me so warmly on the cheek, just there. 'You must make haste, my dear,' he said as he patted me, and with that he made a terrible clutch at my arm, but before I could catch him he collapsed and *sank* backwards between the sofa and the table here."

Nathalie looked at the dark flowered carpet at her feet, where a ray of sunlight from underneath the blind brought up the colours, red and green. So that was where papa had lain.

"I was so certain that I should be called away first," sighed Fru Söegaard. "But it was not to be. And to that one must submit. But thank God, I firmly believe it will not be very many years before I am allowed to follow him."

Nathalie patted her mother's hand. Such tiny little hands mamma had. They were old now and puffy, with dimples and folds at the joints, but it was easy to see that they had once been charming. Her face was still handsome in a way; swollen with weeping as it was, with drooping cheeks and double chin, the features of her mother's youth stood out like a defiant ship's prow—the high, narrow forehead, the aquiline nose that projected from the fatty deposits of old age. Wrinkles had not been able to destroy the main lines of the mouth, with its Cupid's bow and a little red berry for underlip. And the yellow-grey eyes were remarkably handsome in their lines, though now of course their lids were red

with weeping and the brown pouches under them were swollen.

How strange, thought Nathalie, that she simply could not remember what her mother looked like before she settled down into what she was now. For she must still have been extremely pretty when they were big children —she was so in the photographs from that time. But in her case at any rate no picture of her parents had fixed itself in her memory; it had been retouched, so to speak, from day to day, so that she could never remember them other than as they were when she saw them.

"You may be sure papa is *beautiful* in death," sighed Fru Söegaard, getting up. "We will go in to him now, Thali, won't we?" She gave her daughter's arm a squeeze, and then hung on it heavily, leading her out into the passage—the long passage with its yellow paint and brown panelling which had always reminded Nathalie of a school corridor; there was something so dull about it. Fru Seögaard passed her hand over her husband's overcoat which was hanging there: "I don't know how I shall ever have the heart to clear away Thomas's things. In the bedroom too everything is as he left it." And then she opened the door of the study.

The coffin took up an incredible amount of space in the narrow little room; it stood upon chairs. There was a brownish twilight; here again the blind was drawn and the room lay on the shady side of the house.

Nathalie felt cold about the lips, with a queer pricking sensation in the skin of her face—papa. He was changed —as though death had simplified him. Or as though the father in her life, the father in papa's own living world, all that she remembered of him and all she remembered of this old home, had already faded into a terribly distant

past. The dead man in the coffin was something different from papa when he was alive. Unconsciously this shaped itself into a mental image: she was sitting in a railway carriage; the train seemed to be leaving the station in a town where she had lived a long time. Rapidly the last of the streets and houses flew past the window. Then all at once they were travelling through an open landscape—fields, trees, farms here and there—where she had never been before. The town had been left so far behind that it was already difficult to remember it. She thought she had already forgotten what papa was like when alive.

She put out her hand and touched the dead man's cheek. How icy cold he was, cold in a different way from all such cold things as have never been warmed by life. All at once she saw there was something in the structure of papa's face which reminded her of mamma's. He too had that high, narrow forehead, those deep orbits, in which the pupils lay like globes under the withered membrane of their lids; but there was something handsome in their shape. Under the big hooked nose she saw his mouth properly for the first time—the long moustache streaked with yellow and grey, which used to overhang it, was brushed to the sides—actually papa had had a handsome, finely moulded mouth. Now she could see that the moustache, together with the bushy, threatening eyebrows and the old-fashioned grey artist's mane which he combed back, and the low collars which allowed the throat and the Adam's apple to stand out freely—all this as it were was part of the portrait of himself that Thomas Söegaard wished people to see: the radical editor of the old school, the sort of man who had been in America and had returned, bringing liberation and enlightenment, like the people in the old books of Bjornson and Ibsen——

"Is he not handsome, Nathalie?"

She took her weeping mother in her arms to console her with a tender kiss: "Yes, he is handsome, Mamma." Mamma too had had a similar ideal image of herself—an emancipated woman pioneer at the head of movements and endeavours. Oh yes, now she could see how well and happily those two had marched side by side towards lofty and radiant goals, which were sufficiently vague to enable them to dispute about the road to be followed and to quarrel over the actual aspect of the goal. On the way they had disagreed about every possible thing, but never on the main point—that they were moving towards progress and liberty.

"And how proud he was of you, Thali. You may be sure he often spoke of you—for you were the one of his children who had realized something of what we were always fighting for, in the great and nationally useful undertaking of which you are at the head. It is a pity you have no children of your own, Thali—it must make it impossible for you to enter into the feelings of parents—what happiness you and those like you bring us——"

"Dear Mamma." Nathalie stroked the icy hands of the dead man, distorted by rheumatism. They were clasped over a bunch of cut flowers—roses, geraniums and sprigs of myrtle.

"From Ragna and her little ones," her mother explained. "She wished papa to take with him something from the windows at Adlersborg. Papa always took such an interest in Ragna's flowers. She is so successful with them. It's a pity it's Sunday to-day. I'm sure you would have liked him to have something from you in his coffin." Her mother looked at her reproachfully, and Nathalie realized what a mistake she had made in forgetting to

bring some flowers with her from Oslo. "But perhaps you can get some from one of the neighbours—— Fru Olsvig for instance, she always has such pretty ones——"

Ragna looked in at the door:

"Mamma—I think you ought to let Thali go upstairs and get straight. You know what a state one is in after coming off the boat——"

When Nathalie came down from her room Ragna was in the hall waiting for her. She took her sister round the waist:

"And you've not had anything to eat yet. Come and have breakfast now; you must be frightfully hungry."

She was indeed. There was such a lovely smell of fresh bread.

"Margit has some new horse-shoe rolls for you—they're her speciality. I can tell you, Margit's a first-rate cook. Isn't it funny that mamma should be so fearfully keen on good food now that she's too old to keep up all those committee meetings of hers? Do you remember how *awful* the food used to be at home in old days?" Ragna laughed aloud.

"I dare say that was because papa didn't care a bit what he ate."

"My dear, as a matter of fact papa was as fond of his food as anybody—don't you remember when he went to the fish dinners at the club? And when he had something good at dinner-parties? But at home the idea was that it was too materialistic to care what one had to eat. He simply didn't dare to tell mamma she ought to spare the time from all her high-minded hobbies and look after her housekeeping a little."

Nathalie's baggage lay scattered about the rooms. The

coffee was delicious and Margit's horse-shoe rolls were grand. The eggs were served in an egg-basket which was not dirty, and they were boiling hot. There were home-cooked delicacies and bowls of clear jelly, yellow and ruby-red. Ragna and mamma took a cup of coffee for company's sake, and they bustled to and fro among cardboard boxes of hats and dresses and coats and *crêpe* veils wrapped in layer after layer of crinkly white tissue paper. A kind of froth of interested activity had spread itself over the house of mourning, and the comfort of a good meal brought peace and refreshment to Nathalie's senses.

All the time Ragna was talking with unembarrassed serenity, saying that of course there was no sense in changing the arrangements, the coffin must certainly be taken to the chapel this evening; "and then you will dine with us, as arranged. Mads says the same; the weather's really quite warm now, let me tell you. Dear sweet little Mammy, he looks so nice as he lies now—we should like to remember him like that, shouldn't we? Not let that beautiful impression be spoilt, don't you think? It couldn't be any pleasure to Nikolai and Gerda to see him changed as he might be by that time, and Mads says——"

Nathalie was thinking that ever since she left home she had always had the idea that it was cosy in this room, although it was probably the world's most uncomfortable dining-room—without exaggeration it was whimsically ugly. The logs of the walls were painted a glistening bluish green and the dado a cheese-red. The furniture was machine-made in a kind of dragon style, and the sideboard was simply a miracle of oddity; the lower cupboard resembled a little shooting-cabin and the upper part a miniature raised storehouse with balconies at the sides,

on which all mamma's electric coffee-pots and egg-boilers and other bazaar prizes stood getting tarnished. The rough home-industry curtains with red and blue borders had been woven by Gerda for the silver wedding, and the walls were hung at wide intervals with the faded tapestries in carpet patterns of which all the daughters had embroidered several lengths while they were still living at home.

"Oh yes, Mamma, when the sleeves have been altered, you'll see. And then it must be taken up. Isn't it extraordinary—ready-made dresses in out-sizes always seem to be made for giantesses with a breadth of shoulder and a length of arm like I don't know what, and never for ordinary womenfolk who've put on their increase amidships. Yes, Mamma, I assure you—don't you agree, Thali, Mamma ought to take the georgette—such a delicate material——"

She wished to have one more sight of her father, but alone. In the town below the bells were ringing for evensong as Nathalie went through their garden to find something she could lay in her father's coffin. It was rather sentimental—but she had discovered that a death is always accompanied by a little sentimentality, whether the sorrow be heavy or light.

Mamma was quite set upon having the funeral service at the church. This seemed rather odd: Nathalie remembered the time when her father had never missed an opportunity of attacking the clergy and the State Church. It was true he had backed the liberal theologians and everything that called itself broad-minded Christianity, whenever they came to loggerheads with orthodoxy. But no doubt this was only because he believed that

everything which came under the head of liberalism and broad-mindedness must necessarily belong to his party. And certainly mamma had not been much of a church-woman either—she backed up the historical Jesus, because she maintained that he had been one of the pioneers of women's rights, while the clergy and the Church had never done anything but oppress her sex. Now she talked as if she had been an orthodox member of the congregation all her life. And it was touching to see how happy she was that papa was to be buried from the church.

The afternoon sunshine was warm and golden, bringing out such a lovely scent of mould and pungent growth among the gooseberry-bushes. Their garden was so delightfully situated; you had a view of the whole fjord and the islands and rocks, and below you lay the town with its roofs of old red tiles or new grey slates glistening in the sun. The tree-tops quivered in their vernal brown with shades of blue. But it was not easy to find anything of which to make a bouquet. The snowdrops in front of the veranda were quite over, and it would hardly do to lay gooseberry-twigs on a corpse—though they were so charming with their fresh curly leaves and tiny greenish-yellow blooms with a luscious smell.

In the end she broke off a few sprays of the forsythia bush—they might serve as a greeting both from Nikolai and herself.

The blind flapped slightly in the draught as she opened the door of the study. The light in here had turned to amber, the sun had reached this side. But although the window was open she could notice a faint, unpleasant smell, as of rancid wax and something else. But to look at he was still the same. Ragna's flowers between the clasped hands had withered.

—I was once as full of Gil Morrice
As the berry of the stane—

"Oh, papa, papa, my papa." She kissed the dead man for the last time. "Forgive me, papa. But I *was* fond of you, you know that——"

She chanced to see that the drawer of the desk was partly open; no doubt Sönnichsen had left it so that morning. But it looked so untidy in this room where he was lying dead. Nathalie went to close the drawer.

On the top lay a cabinet photograph of herself. With bunches of curls at the ears—so it was when she was eighteen or twenty. Nathalie looked at it, at first with a certain natural complacency: fancy, how pretty I was—— Rather chubby about the face—that was the time papa used to call her Natty Bumpy to tease her. The eyes were big and smiling—the smile seemed to radiate from the whole soft girlish face. Goodness knows what had made her smile like that. For she had assured herself, and she believed it too, that she had never learnt to smile properly until she had Sigurd.

And in a way that was no doubt true. To her the affection of the man she loved had really been all that is meant by such good old figurative expressions as dedication, sunrise, the coming of spring. She had not known what it was to be happy before, she thought. But the youthful smile in this portrait looked as if it was meant for everything and nothing in particular—the smile that one smiles simply because one *exists*. She thought she was still young—she looked young, felt young. But the youth of one's early years—one cannot recall it fully when it is past, it cannot be recaptured, cannot be simulated.

Sigurd and Nathalie were to have gone home on the Sunday following the funeral, but on Friday morning Mads Adler rang up. Ragna had been taken ill during the night and would have to keep her bed for at least a week. Nikolai was obliged to go home on Saturday evening, and Gerda—well, Gerda could *be* so little to her mother. Nathalie would have to try and arrange things so that she could stay at any rate for a couple of days of next week.

"Yes, you see, it was too much for me after all," said Ragna contentedly, when Nathalie was sitting with her during the morning. She looked as if she was in the best of health, trim and charming in a bed-jacket of old-rose lace which went extremely well with her copper-red hair and fair skin. The beds had been moved apart, so that Ragna had a bedside table with flowers and books and dainties on each side of her. "Bless my soul! Fancy your not having seen it—beginning of September. What—mamma? She never sees anything like that till it shouts at her. One would think she had chanced upon her children in the waste-paper basket after one of her committee meetings. I should hate to have anything go wrong now, but at first I was frightfully annoyed about it. But as we can afford it and have room and all that—Mads is perfectly right, it would be a shame if we didn't accept another child and were grateful for it into the bargain. And then the others are so big and are getting so troublesome—so now I'm looking forward tremendously to having a little one again, one that can really be my baby for a long, long time yet. But you *must* stay till Tuesday at any rate, Thali—the cards, returning thanks, you know, and all that. And mamma *is* pretty exhausting just now——"

Ragna looked inquisitively at her sister.

"No, I dare say not, as you're so happy together." Ragna's eyes had a look of profundity. "And I will tell you one thing—having children changes a man *at least* as much as his wife. That is, if he's at all cut out for being a father. It makes him so realistic as it were. Well, not papa for instance—" she laughed loudly. "But then he never had the ghost of an idea of what children are like—how matter-of-fact they were and how well they understand what are realities and what are only make-believe and for fun. I can tell you, Mads is great with the children. But that's just because he always knows precisely what is real and what is play and what kind of rules children have for all their games and so on——

"You can't be sure, Thali, that Sigurd wouldn't be a good deal changed—many things would have been different between you if you had had children. Yes, you too. You too would have been different in his eyes. So I don't know that you need be so unhappy about it all the same."

After a while Nathalie said softly, without looking up:

"We have even talked about adopting one. I don't know whether you remember—I believe I mentioned it in a letter—a Fru Baarsrud at Aursund who was a cousin of Sigurd's. Her husband was chairman of the local council and kept a store and so on. They were killed in a motor accident a year or two ago. They left a little girl, about three years old. The sweetest child you can imagine. But his parents would not give her up."

"How sad." Ragna shook her head among the pillows. "You shall have one of mine if it's twins, Thali," she said laughing.

Nathalie too smiled as she answered: "I'm sure you wouldn't keep that promise if it turned out so."

"No, I don't suppose I should."

Nikolai behaved as if he was quite out of touch with the place; there was no doubt he was the one who had travelled farthest from everything at home. For that matter he was already becoming a stranger to his parents and all their ways even before he was grown up. But he had some friends of his boyhood down in the town, and he looked them up. They did not see much of him up at Sumarlide.

And Gerda. Ragna said in her downright way: "Pff, she looks as if she scented herself with Fleurs du Mal." At any rate she didn't look well. In itself of course there was nothing remarkable in a face that was retouched and painted over, even pretty thickly; but it seemed that Gerda had made up her mind that the mask she exhibited to the world was not to take over a single feature from her original face. She had moved and altered the shape of eyebrows and lips—had even succeeded in giving her nose a different appearance, due to the way she made up. Only in the colour of her hair had she worked on the original foundation—fair with a dash of red—but now it was golden, with an extraordinary pink shade which was certainly not to be found in nature. Her figure was charming, supple and shapely. But she did not strike one as young—rather the contrary. It occurred to Nathalie, as she looked at her sister, that the opposite of young is not old, that youth and old age are only phases of one and the same process—that of having no age. It was impossible to guess for how many years Gerda had looked as she did now, or for how long she intended to remain unchanged.

Capable she must be. She and that Swedish friend of

hers had been running their gymnastic institute in London for seven years, and evidently they were doing well. Before that, as a nurse in America and various parts of Europe, she must have had a rather hard time. But what had started the process which had changed the softest and most impulsive among them into this masked and as it were blank creature, was that disgusting business with Kai Seehusen—and the way in which her parents, especially her mother, had taken it. Nathalie had no doubt of that. When, after the scandal, they sent Gerda to stay with her, she had had her fits when she talked endlessly night after night, till Nathalie was in despair about her—Gerda *couldn't* stop talking. But Nathalie had never believed Gerda capable of putting in practice the schemes she ventilated in those desperate nights, or of making herself invulnerable to all attacks. What Gerda was now like within herself, Nathalie of course could not tell—she had certainly outgrown her old confidingness long ago. And that was a good thing. There was something in her manner with Nathalie which might mean that she had not forgotten what they had once gone through together—a kind of non-committal warmth. But it was not to be alluded to in words; and certainly Gerda for her part would not do so.

She was very attentive to her mother. But here again there was something concealed beneath her smooth and pleasant manner. Assuredly Gerda had forgotten nothing and forgiven nothing in that case either, Nathalie thought she could see that.

Nathalie had an overwhelming desire to get Sigurd to go out to Gaasòia with her. But it would hardly do for them to go off by themselves, now that all the brothers and sisters were assembled here for a few days—probably

for the last time. But on that Friday, after she had been with Ragna in the morning, she had such a longing for really intimate companionship with Sigurd—for all the forms and shades of intimacy—that it positively hurt her. She wanted to lie cuddled up to him a whole night, she wanted to walk side by side with him a whole long day in a lonely place. And in the afternoon, when she was sitting with Gerda on the veranda looking at Sigurd's back—he and Nikolai were standing by the flagstaff—it slipped out of her.

"I do wish we could make a trip over to Gaasöia while Sigurd is here."

"Well, but that's quite easy. Stillesen told Nikolai that we can borrow his motor-boat as much as we like."

"I meant—what I really wanted was for Sigurd and I to go there alone. But I don't see how we can do that, when Nikolai is here such a short time."

"But couldn't you go on Sunday, directly after breakfast? Mamma will be going to church. I can go with her, and afterwards I suppose we shall go up to Ragna's."

"Well, if you think it's all right, we'll do that," said Nathalie, delighted.

When they were at home she and Sigurd always slept in the room which had been hers and Gerda's—"the maiden's bower" papa used to call it.

That night the room was filled with moonlight—faint and dreamlike, for the May night was so light in itself. The lacquered white surfaces of the furniture gleamed like water. Sigurd seemed to be dropping off to sleep; they lay very close together, for her old maidenly bed was pretty narrow. But when she cautiously removed his hand from her shoulder and put one foot on the floor he

The sheep were already out on Gaasòia. Pinky-grey clipped ewes and tiny white lambs stood huddled together on the top of the slope against the blue sky, as they came up. Then the whole flock turned about and made off straddling with their slender legs down the other side of the hill. When Nathalie and Sigurd reached the top they saw the sheep grazing quietly far below in the green meadow. In the air above them there was á noise of screeching terns, circling and sheering across the shining sound.

Gaasòia was low, and nearly the whole island was meadow land which rose and fell, with little hollows which gave shelter from the wind and where the heat of the sun was grilling. There were no houses on it, but an old stone fence ran right across the island, the ownership of which was divided between two farms on the mainland.

Nathalie and Sigurd strolled slowly down beside the fence and let the sun warm their backs. They walked so close that they were constantly bumping against each other. It was good to walk on the firm, close turf and feel the warmth of the sun, so they said nothing and simply enjoyed it. Nathalie carried her little mourning hat in her hand; she had filled it with hare's-foot and cinquefoil and the pale little violets that grew around any rocks that projected above the turf.

"I'm so fond of these." She showed Sigurd a bunch of cinquefoil. "If I had to say what is my favourite flower I almost think it's this."

He cupped his hand under hers that held the flowers. "That's a modest choice—for a favourite flower." Each of the heart-shaped yellow petals was marked with a little fiery red spot. Sigurd clasped her whole hand in a

[illegible] "But what I don't like is your pickaninny strawberry blossoms."

"Oh, but anyhow they showed up before they'd ripe. Here on the sunny side."

He nodded. "Yes, it's [illegible] for [illegible]. Real [illegible]."

[illegible]

come to smash with couples who had been fond of one another, simply because what had once been an effusion had degenerated into routine.

"I see, then Sverre's not going to be at Stranna himself this summer," she said after a pause.

"No, he says he hasn't time."

"Oh." She scratched her calf, with a rasping of the silk stocking. "Ooh, I've got horribly stung in those nettles——"

"Poor dear, have you?" He took her slender ankle in his hands.

Nathalie was smoking. Without looking at him—she was following another train of thought—she asked: "Tell me, this Adinda Gaarder—what sort of a person is she? I'm told you know her——"

Sigurd withdrew his hand so sharply that she turned to look at him. And on seeing him redden so oddly she felt a strangely unpleasant surprise.

"Who told you that? What is it you're driving at——?"

"I——! Nothing. I only asked. Is there anything odd about that? It was Sonja who was talking about her the other day. She said Sverre seemed gone on her. And that you knew her too."

"That damned—I won't say what! Can't you really understand that Sonja goes round gossiping about everybody because her own record's not clear? She's no better than that—and so she tells you that So-and-so drinks, and that there must be something between this one and that——"

Nathalie looked at him, astounded. And she felt something within her which hurt—something terrifying threatened her.

"Sonja!" said her husband furiously. "*What* was it she told you?"

"Nothing. Nothing that you need make such a terrible fuss about," she said reluctantly. "I don't remember—it was that evening a fortnight ago when you were to meet these Gaarders. Sonja happened to say that Sverre looked like getting engaged to a Froken Gaarder, and that you knew her too."

"You must never believe a word of Sonja's stories. She talks nothing but bosh. That about Sverre isn't true, I know that."

"No, no." They sat still for a while, saying nothing. Nathalie felt absurdly put out. But when presently she looked at her husband she saw that he was as much out of humour as herself.

"Sonja." He made an ugly grimace. "Tell me, haven't you ever noticed that people who themselves drink more than is good for them are always gossiping about other people drinking, and if they themselves have affairs that won't bear the light of day they tell the same sort of stories about others? I don't know whether they imagine that by doing so they divert attention from their own goings-on. Or whether they're moved by a kind of prompting to confession—that people gossip because they have no one to confess to, but all the same they *must* talk about their sins—those they have committed and those they would like to have the courage to commit. So the way they do it is by gossiping about others."

"I wouldn't call this gossiping on Sonja's part," said Nathalie moodily. "There was nothing *wrong* in what she said about Sverre and this girl——"

"*Wasn't* there?" asked Sigurd after a pause.

Nathalie shook her head.

ously. But she replied: "I was thinking of your sister-in-law—the first one, I mean, Louise."

She must have expected him to ask: what made you think of her? For she felt disappointed at his answering:

"Yes, Asmund changes wives as the loon changes legs."

She had had it in her head to take the opportunity of saying something about Louise being another native of the Aas district—and then she would have led the conversation round to these Gaarders, and the girl, Adinda. Instead of that she asked: "What does that mean?"

"Oh, it's a saying they have in our part of the country. Some story about the loon changing legs with another bird and getting fooled over the bargain. I can't remember how it ran——"

"Louise, didn't she come from there too——?"

"Yes, you know her father was given a living in the North, but Louise stayed behind because she had a post as school-teacher. She wasn't born there."

"Why is it you would never let me go with you when you go to see her?"

"She won't see visitors. And besides, as you didn't know her when she was herself, I don't know—to tell the truth, I don't care that you should see her *now*. You know she was a person whom—I don't mind saying I had a certain respect for Louise."

Yes, Sigurd is faithful, she thought. The others have forgotten her. But he is faithful. And she thought it wouldn't do to speak of the other matter now.

But that night she could not fall asleep in the moonlit room of her girlhood. The other bed stood there narrow and piled high with bedclothes under a striped coverlet.

This was made up of alternate strips of crochet-work and embroidery and lined with pale blue satin. Aunt Ragna had worked two of these and had said that her nieces were to draw lots for them when they married. And then none of them would have anything to say to them.

They might almost serve as a symbol of the marriages of those days. Double beds with handworked white coverlets, two jugs and basins to match, two ornamental towels to hang over the damp and crumpled ones in use. A dining-room in light oak and "Jugend" style—a drawing-room with imitation Empire furniture and a box-sofa. Tall standard lamp with a colossal silk shade, red or yellow, fringed with beads. Woman's Own World, as the ladies' page in the English papers was still headed. And yet——

And yet it certainly meant more than she had suspected as a girl, this view of the home as a microcosm fashioned by a woman out of the material which her husband brought her. If only they had had children she would gladly have given up her position and applied all her working powers to the administration of what Sigurd was able to earn. But as it was, they had no children. And therefore the sacrifice would be meaningless. And after all they had lived happily for sixteen years, with love as the only bond between them.

Their solidarity was firm and secure, in spite of their lives being largely independent of each other. For they were so. Their work constituted two worlds, in which one was engaged in something of which the other knew nothing. Sigurd knew no more about arts and crafts than the majority of countryfolk who have given up craftsmanship. And when they were first married he had

tried to give her a course of electrical engineering—it was comical, he said, that she and all other women-folk spent their lives turning switches and ironing and sewing and sweeping and cooking by electricity, without really knowing anything about it. His zeal was such that she could not take her eyes off him, and what he said went in at one ear and out at the other.

Naturally they discussed the purely economic side of the matter together, as they each contributed to the common housekeeping fund. And when anything worth relating had happened in the course of the day, they told one another about it. They knew each other's colleagues by name, and some of them personally. But their work lay so far outside their partnership that it scarcely even furnished a subject of conversation.

She was fully aware that there was thus a side of her husband of which she was almost entirely ignorant; but no doubt the same might be said of a great number of married women whose whole work was in the home. Although, where there were children, a normally intelligent woman certainly learned a good deal of what one person can learn about another from seeing how her husband reacted to his own youngsters. Poor Sigurd, he ought to have had children. They would certainly have been happy and safe with him.

Of course the same applied to her—a great part of her life lay outside Sigurd's field of vision. But it was a part which was so relatively immaterial that Sigurd, for instance, was not even made jealous if her business obliged her to have a great deal to do with people who were both attractive and amusing. As when they got up that exhibition at Bergen a few years ago—she travelled there in the company of Martin Ringve, the ceramic artist; she

was with him and the young Icelander Asgeirsson every day, they dined together and were invited out together, both Ringve and Asgeirsson were the cheeriest of lads. And Sigurd seemed only pleased that the trip had been a success. But then she didn't take it into her head to be jealous either if Sigurd went out a good deal on his own.

No, it was not exactly jealousy that had made her uneasy of late. But she had known uneasiness—or an indefinite feeling that something unsatisfactory was entering into their relations.

It was no use refusing to admit it—the last year or two had brought a kind of relaxation or whatever she was to call it. Perhaps this was natural, seeing how long they had been married.

The relations between them had always been entirely physical. Only this is a thing which is difficult to determine, because there are so few people who know what it means, and those who imagine their love to have been physical often know least about it. She had always realized for instance that Sigurd was not what is meant by a person of intelligence. Though he had passed all his examinations with distinction; he was apt at learning. But his brain worked slowly, and a certain modesty, or lack of self-confidence, often made his opinions blunt-edged as it were. He hated expressing an opinion about anything he did not understand—and he knew quite well when he didn't understand a thing. In that way he was very wise. On the whole he was not fond of talking—though he liked to sit and chat in intimate surroundings.

But his hands, they could speak for him—could tell you what was in his nature. They were so fine—small and fairly broad, and his wrists were round and powerful.

They were such *good* hands, firm and always warm enough, as though full of peaceful animal health. They could caress her with such playful boldness and roughness, and they could be as kind and cautious as the hands of a child trying to entice an animal—indeed, in his hands and his whole body he could be as quietly affectionate as a good-natured child, when it has persuaded a calf or a kid to come up to it. And for this reason it really suited him that he had grown—well, not stout, but rounder and more supple in the build of his muscles; this fitted in with all that he could express with his body better than in words: his kindly, upright disposition. For even when they were carried away in a common, unconscious rapture, it throbbed through her amid the darkness of felicity that he would never, never be anything but kind to her.

And she knew that he knew about her in the same way—he saw and he sensed what made her happy or unhappy. In the Bible we read that two people "know" one another when they are married. That was such a beautiful expression—and so good. When a man and a woman know one another in such a way that they understand one another, as far as is needed between two human beings, without resorting to all the words that are apt to lead to misunderstanding, then it is good.

Yes, it was good, and she would not be foolish, but would exclude from her thoughts everything but this: that in the last few days their relations had again been what they were in old days. Since Saturday week, when he came home and proposed that they should make a trip together, she had felt that Sigurd had got rid of something that had been worrying him for a long time. And these days they had spent together here, in her little old room—

he had come to her as though he had returned from foreign parts and was glad to be at home again.

The morning light had entirely swallowed up the moonshine, making the white lacquered furniture look so anæmic and thin. The birds had been singing a long while—now there was a tit just outside the window keeping up his ringing *titity, titity*. Nathalie turned her pillow, settled herself again—if only she could get to sleep now, she was so tired——

If it was anything to do with Asmund that had put him so much out of humour, then it was easy to understand his flaring up like that over Sonja. And it was quite likely that this Adinda Gaarder had also given him some trouble—since she had looked him up at the office as soon as she arrived in town. Sigurd was always being asked to do something for somebody.

For that matter—Nathalie smiled into the pillow—it was in that way that her own acquaintance with Sigurd had begun. Goodness, how little he had changed in all these years—from her first sight of him as he appeared on the steep sæter road in a cart behind a dun horse overtaking her and Hildur. Where were they going? he asked, and then he offered at once to take their rucksacks on his cart, he was going just past the Sandtrö sæter.

She could call up his image whenever she pleased. He pulled up and touched his cap with a couple of fingers. He had on a light-blue shirt and one of those old-fashioned Osterdal caps. She had never seen one before; it was like an English jockey's cap with a fearfully exaggerated peak—but how well it suited him. It was one he had found in the storehouse loft at home. He was very full of folk-dancing and all that just then—even while they were staying at the Sandtrö sæter he wanted to teach

ing breeze, but had not the energy to get up and go to the window, although the morning was so fine. And how the birds sang here—she wondered whether any of Nikolai's old nesting-boxes were still there.

She could stay in bed as long as she liked this morning; mamma always had breakfast in bed. So it didn't matter that she had had no sleep—it didn't matter——

CHAPTER THREE

ON Monday evening Fru Sòegaard and her daughters had an invitation to the parsonage at Fardal.

Pastor Andreassen and his wife were now alone, their younger daughter had been married the year before. Nini, the elder, was a journalist in Oslo; she had left the parsonage atmosphere quite a long way behind. That was perhaps one reason why Fru Andreassen accepted Gerda with calmness: formerly she used to say that ladies who used cosmetics looked like whited sepulchres, but now Nini was pretty well plastered too. And many years had gone by since Gerda Sòegaard had presented the little town with a thundering scandal—so many new people had come to live there since that time, the bathing resort had grown up, and one thing and another—Nathalie had the impression that only some scattered fragments were left of the old moral régime when everything was in the light of day.

Besides which, the change in Gerda was almost comical when she put on her big horn-rimmed spectacles. They made her look the picture of industry as she sewed at a tiny piece of cross-stitch embroidery. "Gerda was always so clever with her fingers," said Fru Andreassen encouragingly. "Weaving now, I suppose you have no time for that over in London——?"

Nathalie knitted and was thoroughly bored. The new parsonage was far from being cheerful or comfortable.

She had not been here since the fire; it had killed the climbing roses and the great arbor vitæ outside, which used to give such a strange, good scent when they sat in the old garden-room in the evening. Fortunately Fru Andreassen was delighted with their new villa; she had shown them over it from cellar to attic.

The pastor retired directly after dinner, and his wife and mamma began to exchange the same remarks that they had made before going to the table. About papa and the funeral, about their absent children and grandchildren, about Ragna's condition and Bergljot who was also going to have a baby. "I think it *so* sensible of them to decide to have the child at once, instead of waiting," said Fru Andreassen. "Of course things are greatly changed up there from what they were in our time, there is an excellent steamboat service now, and Halfdan has a fine big motor-boat. But all the same Bergljot *is* left a good deal alone at home. And you know, a little child is great company—and an occupation too——"

Gerda rolled up her work. "Do you know, Fru Andreassen—if you have no objection, I think Nathalie and I would like to go for a little walk. There's no knowing when I shall see the old places again."

That was so natural, Fru Andreassen thought. "Only don't go too far, will you? The car is ordered for twelve o'clock, isn't that so, Fru Söegaard? And we must have a little glass of wine before you leave. It's only my own home-made, you know, but this year I really *have* a rhubarb wine that has turned out *quite* well. In fact, my son-in-law took it for real sherry the first time he tasted it——"

They might go round by Gusslund and call there, Nathalie proposed. But Fru Andreassen explained with

that peculiar smile of hers—she smiled at everything she said as though correcting a misunderstanding in all civility—that at Gusslund they would certainly have gone to bed at this hour. For they were in the middle of the spring sowing, and so countryfolk went to rest earlier than at other times. "Fru Nordgaard has lived so long in Oslo that she must have forgotten all these things," she said, excusing Nathalie with a smile.

The outhouses had escaped the fire. Low and spacious, with great projecting roofs of old tiles, they lay spread out in the twilight of the spring evening, with a warm smell of hay and cattle-shed as in old days. And as the sisters came to the gate with its great ash-trees, the moon, yellow and round, already beginning to wane, shone through the tangled lattice of bare twigs.

There were midges already over the pond in the hollow. It must be full of frog-spawn too; the Söegaard children had studied the life of tadpoles in it. And beyond the pond there was an outcrop of granite, with natural seats in the smooth-worn rock; there they had lain reading Mauritz Hansen's stories on summer afternoons. Nathalie had never come across any one who possessed Mauritz Hansen's tales except Dean Wingfeldt. "What fun we had here in the Wingfeldts' time," said Gerda, as though her thoughts had followed the same line.

"Yes, they were delightful people. Have you any idea what has become of them?" As she spoke it struck Nathalie that of course Melanchthon Wingfeldt had married Valborg Seehusen's sister. But Gerda answered quite calmly:

"Oh yes, I hear about them now and again. From Kai. He always comes to see me when he's in London."

Nathalie hadn't a notion what to say. On the left of the road the steep side of the church hill rose straight up with its bare rock and bushes and grass in the crevices. They and the Wingfeldts' children had played at climbing into Jotunheim here. Water trickled down the cliff, making the road muddy. They used to think these trickles of water came from the churchyard, which made them rather horrifying and romantic. Not for the world would they have eaten any of the fern-roots which grew here in abundance.

On the other side of the road the lake gleamed palely beyond the thicket. *Krap, krap* came a sleepy sound from among the reeds—there were ducks here as of old. And the first faint hesitating glitter of gold on the crisping ripples told that soon the moonlight would lay its shining bridge across the whole lake.

"You know that I have come to the conclusion," said Gerda quietly, "that it was best for me, things turning out as they did—loathsome as it all was at the time. Even if I think I might have been spared some of the details. But I assume I must have seen quite clearly, even at that time, subconsciously at any rate, that Kai was never a person to *marry*. Although I would then have married him with all the happiness in life. And even to-day—I can't deny that it makes me happy enough every time he comes. Especially when I haven't seen him for a year or so."

"Honestly, Gerda, I think life has treated you pretty shabbily," said Nathalie.

"Oh, life." Gerda gave a little tug at the long suède gloves with which she was flicking at the midges. "That's such a solemn word to use."

"People then. And especially Kai. That he should

hang on all these years—that he couldn't leave you in peace, I mean. It must have been far better if you had finished with *him* when you left the country."

"I don't think so. Then I should have gone on idealizing him, I believe. Now I take him for what he is and accept the fact—that although I have known many who were better and many who were worse than Kai, I have finished with them all, sooner or later. But definitely not with Kai. Whatever may be the reason."

"I'm quite sure I shouldn't have been able to forgive. But I expect you're altogether far kinder than the rest of us. I admire the way you can be so sweet to mamma. I don't believe I could have managed to forgive either her or papa. Well, papa perhaps. But mamma, no!"

"Oh, mamma, poor thing. Now that it's all past I can see what a frightful business it must have been for her of all people. And so bewildering. Think of her spending her whole lifetime preaching and agitating—fighting, as she calls it—for a new morality and modern divorce laws and woman's right to dispose of her own person, and all that sort of thing. And then she discovers that I have disposed freely of my own person, only in a way that had never entered her head. For you know, if I had strained every nerve to get Kai and Valborg divorced and preserved my virtue till I could become Fru Seehusen number two, it would have been all right—mamma would have been ready to defend me against the whole world—anyhow against the whole town. And I am sure she was perfectly honest in thinking it was vulgar and immoral and a sin against what she calls truthfulness when I accepted the situation, knowing that Kai couldn't get a divorce. Well, you know, I naturally *hoped*—that a

miracle might happen. But even if it had happened—if Kai had hit upon some way of getting on without Valborg's money, there would still have been the children. He could not let himself be divorced and abandon them entirely to that hysterical creature—that would have been utterly unscrupulous. Nobody could guess what she might have taken it into her head to do if Kai had gone to her and said he wanted to go his own way. For that matter nobody would ever have imagined she would act as she did to Kai and me——

"But I can quite understand papa and mamma, Nathalie. Perhaps I have more of that kind of imagination than you. It may be because I've come to see how much these children of Kai's mean to him. For really they have always been one of his first considerations—his second consideration, I might say." Gerda gave a cynical laugh. "Well, well. It was a horrid business, and horrid for mamma and papa having me before their eyes the whole time—I was altogether crushed and done for. And this after all the exaggerated ideas they had nursed about our cleverness and all their dreams of how we were to achieve something great and independent—in their own line. And then *their* daughter allowed herself to be caught, by Valborg and her witnesses, in a situation which certainly *is* ridiculous, if one happens to be surprised in it. On them the scandal *did* come with a crash—just think of all the opponents they had in their various public movements, what a handle this gave them. Yes, they had a pretty bad time. And on the top of that they had the knowledge of what I was suffering. Can't you see—they couldn't help feeling it was inconsiderate of me to go and fall into such depths of despair just when it was all they could do to bear their own burdens. And all the

time it was one of fate's infamous tricks that their sufferings were a result of mine——"

"I can never imagine myself behaving as they did. If it had been my daughter——"

"Pooh, you have no daughter! When one hears about parents turning their daughter out of their home because she has got into trouble—or cutting off a son for some scrapes he has got into and only thinking of packing him off as far away as possible—well, poor things, they can't do that so easily nowadays, but you know, even in our young days, the black sheep of the family! I'm sure it isn't that they're not fond of their children, on the contrary—they feel it so sharply in the part of themselves which their child *is*, that they try in sheer panic to bite off the limb that has been caught and crushed in the trap."

"All parents are not like that though," Nathalie dissented.

"Many are primitive enough for it. If the worst comes to the worst I prefer them to such as Ragna or Bergljot Andreassen. For whom it is simply a question of how they are going to furnish their existence—here it might be a good thing to put in a baby. So they instal the baby."

"But Ragna is so fond of her children." Nathalie protested feebly. "And I really think she looks after them well. Girlie and Thomas are so healthy and well turned out——"

"And well they might be! But in reality I don't know of anything so brutal as people providing themselves with children simply for their own gratification. No, let us be thankful for mamma, who thought herself a martyr for having had to go through the business six times, but when we were once born was in despair over those she

children in our time, that ought to be left to those who believe in God and are bold enough to hope that in some incomprehensible way or other he will manage to make things turn out for the best, in spite of all. Any one else will deserve all that they'll get in the time that's coming—when the young and able-bodied will be in such a small minority that they will seriously consider parental abortion."

"What an expression! I never heard anything——"

"You may safely take your oath that both you and I will live to see it in practice. You see, you don't know much of life outside our own circles—and there the old people have usually put something by, or they draw a pension, or have an unmarried daughter with a job who keeps them. I wonder if you have an idea what it costs in money and trouble to keep alive an old person who can't work any more—for ten, twelve, twenty years. I know a good deal about it, I can tell you—I've travelled as nurse to rich old ladies, and I've worked in asylums and hospitals for homeless old people. It's a drudgery—and then they're hardly ever contented in institutions of this kind. The only thing that can really bring any satisfaction to old people is to be able still to feel that they are useful and of some importance—with their experience and insight which they can retail in constant doses to the profit of their juniors. But in these old age homes everybody is full of good advice and has nobody to pass it on to. In former days families were so constituted that children and grand-children accepted the advice patiently—partly because they were often very fond of their old ones. Apart from that they had a certain feeling of piety—they believed that family life was in conformity with law. God, or Nature, or whatever they called it, had ordained it

thus and thus; their parents had been subject to the law, and they themselves were subject to the law. Can't you understand that it can no longer be so when all the children as they grow up *know* that they have been brought into existence in order to fit in with a plan which other people have devised for their lives? Why in the world should these children of calculation think they owe a scrap of duty to their parents? They may be as fond of their children as they please—the children have every right to answer that they jolly well ought to be fond of what they had made up their minds to have. We didn't ask to be brought into the world—that's what children have always said when they were discontented with life. But in former days the parents could answer that it was God's will and all the rest of it. Nowadays children know who will they have to thank for finding themselves in a world that doesn't suit them. They are here because their parents decreed it so and didn't change their minds while they were on the way."

Nathalie gave a little shudder. "I think your talk's disgusting——"

"I think the thing is disgusting. If young people are to be ground between the millstones of wars and revolutions and depressions and epidemics—or to labour under neurasthenia and a sense of impotence because they are not free to determine for themselves what they will do with their lives—— And the parents have the temerity to say that they're willing to take this responsibility on themselves alone. But in that case they have no right to expect their children to be dutiful. And it will seem perfectly natural for the young to argue in this fashion: old folks can't get much enjoyment out of life anyhow. Why should we pay through the nose for keeping useless and

discontented people alive when they only become less valuable to society every day they live?"

"It's horrid to talk like that, Gerda. Besides, the old people are just the ones who want to live, simply to be alive as long as they can——"

"That's it. But the young can never understand why they want to. What they always think is that life can't be worth living when one's old."

They had reached the bridge where the Fardal river runs out of Long Water. Down towards the Gaasöia sound the country lay in twilight under the moon, but the shadows seemed obliterated as there was no darkness in the air. Only where the river flowed in the shade of the bluffs was there a gathering of darkness, but last year's growth of rushes along the stream was quite luminous in the moonlight.

"The dew's falling—feel!" said Nathalie when she had put her hands on the railing of the bridge. The stillness was overpowering—the chuck-chuck of a motor-boat among the islands and the beat of horses' hoofs in a paddock only served to emphasize the silence.

"I believe you're wrong, Gerda," she said quietly. "People are not merely—if they were as you assume, they would be utterly perverse. I dare say it's true that children in our time don't feel that they owe a duty to their parents in quite the same way as in old days, when everybody took it for granted that one was born because it was the will of God. But I believe that most parents take a great deal more trouble to gain the affection of their children, in a purely human way, precisely because they know that the old excuses no longer hold good. When one has to bear the responsibility oneself—without any stone such as what used to be called the will of God or

the order of Nature to lean one's back against and get relief from one's load, one is bound to believe that parents are becoming more conscientious."

"Yes, I dare say you believe that too," said Gerda derisively.

"At any rate there has never been so much talk about the need for building a safer and more equitable world for those who come after us——"

"As papa and mamma used to say. Therefore the belief in authority must be fought down, said papa—a freer, more self-reliant generation. And then we find the new generation so greedy for authority that they're ready to swear fidelity to the Devil himself, simply because he is undeniably a commanding personality. Emancipation of women, said mamma. And she *meant* in reality emancipation from all that sex business—for even if she could not do without papa she herself considered that a weakness, rather feebly. That was why she always tried to assert herself against him and quarrelled with him even when they were really of the same mind. But she had dreams of the good time coming—when every woman would be self-supporting and would have such a good situation that any man would be forced to acknowledge it as a favour if a woman condescended to marry him. So mamma imagined that every woman would have a queue of suitors waiting on her and would be able to dictate her own terms—decide what little rations of married life she would serve out to her husband. Well, their campaign has resulted in the same way as all the rest of the world's reformations and revolutions. Namely, in something different."

"You're bitter against them all the same, Gerda," said Nathalie softly. "More than you will admit."

"Not exactly bitter, I think. I *am* fond of them. I feel it's sad that I wasn't able to see papa alive. And sad that he should die so soon, when I'm sure he would have got much enjoyment out of life for many years to come. He understood so little of the present time that he would simply have taken it for a transitory phase, when it looks as if fewer and fewer people believe in the ideas he has championed. And I'm sorry for mamma of course. But it isn't *only* because we know that mamma will get on all right—she's certain to get a new interest in life out of being a widow and busying herself with Ragna's children and discovering something she has a use for in religion—it isn't only for this reason that we take mamma's grief calmly. It isn't only because they had such shocking taste that we don't care if Sumarlide is to be sold now and all the furniture sent to the auction-rooms. But the point is, you see, that the affection of parents is usually uncritical, while that of children is rarely so. What our parents are like in themselves is more important than how they behave to us. Frankly I don't think they had much talent for being parents, but I can quite see they did their best to acquire it. And I'm fond of them because they're a couple of sweet, innocent, warm-hearted people who have always had good intentions.

"——Nikolai and I happened to be talking about all this the other day. He told me that one of the things he remembers about papa was when he was building himself a canoe. Papa came down and insisted on helping. And you can understand he told Nikolai a whole lot of things as he did so—about the different kinds of canoes used by savages and how they build them and paddle them. The kind of thing he had read in the encyclopædia and popu-

lar scientific books, so that he had a sort of journalistic smattering of it all. You can guess that Nikko knew much more about it than papa. But just for that reason he had a strong feeling at that very time that he was awfully fond of papa."

They jumped the ditch. The acrid, dewy scent of the spiræa hedge met them as they stood holding on to the posts of the fence. Within the old farm-house garden the shadows of the apple-trees fell across the withered, untidy grass plots. Nathalie could see that the broad border of auriculas still surrounded the beds in front of the veranda steps. But the veranda looked more askew and rotten than ever, as if collapsing under a heavy web of bare creeper.

The moon shone down on the house, making the dark glazed roof-tiles glisten; but the places that had been patched with ordinary red tiles seemed more numerous now. The low façade lay dozing with its dark windows under the shadow of the heavy hip-roof. It was a charming little building of the Empire period—an officer was said to have built it, but for half a century Gusslund had been owned by farmers, and the dwelling-house was in bad repair.

"I'm sorry we can't see them," said Gerda. "Marie Gusslund must be getting on for seventy-five now. She used to be kind to us, don't you remember, Thali?"

The little octagonal summer-house with its pointed roof still stood in the corner of the garden where the gate led out to the goose-pond. It wanted painting so badly that it was quite dark; the black unglazed windows were protected by the remains of their gratings, and the weathercock on the roof was gone.

"You know," said Gerda, "our garden was lovely

too, wasn't it? Though they never made anything of it. Nikko tried—do you remember how hard he worked? But it was delightful to hide away down at the bottom with a book—to lie in the grass and look down on the town and out over the whole fjord and islands——"

They jumped on to the road again and started to walk back towards the bridge. On the other side of the lake the sheer moist cliff of the church hill gleamed in the moonlight. The whitewashed church shone above it, but the huge old trees surrounding it loomed like thin grey clouds in the blue of the night sky.

"But then you can see for yourself," said Nathalie. "I too am fond of them because they are a pair of good people, and not because I think they were very successful in their relations with us. When I was a little girl I used always to be afraid when they got up their big scenes—I screamed on mamma's account when papa raged at her and vice versa. And afterwards I was mortally afraid they would divorce—you know, the maids used to say, when mamma travelled about giving those lectures about divorce, that it was because she wanted a divorce herself, and that it wasn't at all surprising, with the rude way the master was treating her. But I didn't want them to be divorced—I was fond of them both, and so I thought it was a shame. Besides, I had a feeling that they kept one another in check. We seemed to have more peace for our own affairs when they were rampaging with theirs. For I found it insufferable when they got one of those fits of wanting to join us as comrades and be confidential——"

Gerda nodded. "That was ghastly, made one feel like a fool. I believe we all felt that, except Ragna. She didn't seem to have much physical sensibility, or whatever one can call it. For I'm sure it's purely physical, the instinct

that makes us bristle up when parents or teachers or any of the older generation try to mix and be pals with us when we're children. I absolutely believe it's the result of the antagonism between growing organisms and those that are fully matured or beginning to get ready for dissolution. Their vital rhythms are so different that they're bound to produce discords when they try to live in chorus. And that makes me believe that things will get worse, the young will grow even more pitiless towards their progenitors, when the relations between them are based upon principles which the world has never seen before. When things reach such a pitch that the children will be handed over to teachers and State-appointed functionaries for the greater part of their time. Parents, sometimes at any rate, have a sense of this somatic opposition I'm talking about and are wise enough to keep at a certain distance—even if they call it preserving their dignity, and often do it in a stupid and comical way. But teachers and functionaries never have any instinct, as far as I've seen. And to tell the truth it will take some very remarkable people to be willing to give themselves trouble and sacrifice some of their own convenience in order to feed a mass of old folks, when their acquaintance with the preceding generation has been largely limited to school-teachers and officials and leaders of youth movements."

Nathalie shook her head. "I believe you're wrong all the same. Theoretically there may be something in what you say. But when you take a definite individual case. Can you imagine the children of Mads and Ragna, for instance, going in for parent-abortion or whatever you called it——?"

"Little Minda and Thomas at any rate have no cause

to be among the worse. Mads is a straight man, and there's a great deal that's sweet about Ragna—naturally, as she's always saying. And they see so much of them that they learn to know them all round, not merely the faces people put on when they have their children with them. The worse, I'm sure, will be those who are never allowed to see their parents except *en face*—because they're so taken up with other things that they are directly occupied with their children the whole of the time they can spare for them. That is, if they care for them. For it isn't all parents who do."

"It's not so all the same, no, it isn't, Gerda. I grant you people are cowardly and greedy and egoistic and all that, and we have motives we don't care to acknowledge for most of the good we do. But we *do* good sometimes, and want to be honest and just and good, as far as in us lies and as far as we dare. It's like the upper and under side of a leaf. The side that's turned up is smooth and green and finely veined, the under side is rough and coarsely ribbed, and that's where you will find the lice. What we call our good sides can't be anything but the part of our being which it is natural and vitally necessary for us to turn towards the light. Perhaps the fact that in future people will have to exert themselves rather more to win the respect of their children may tend to make them more natural again—so that there will be some check on this moral hypocrisy which demands that in the name of truth all trees shall grow with the wrong side of their leaves perpetually turned up."

"They show the wrong side of their leaves in storms. And in autumn when they shed their leaves they fall with the underside up."

"Oh, you! Virtue and vice are natural products like

vitriol and sugar, don't you remember that? Do you know who first quoted that to me? Do you remember Haakon Stenersen—he was a cadet and came home on a visit, fearfully smart in his uniform, and I was a little in love with him, flattered because he preferred me to the other young girls. Well, we were sitting one day in the back room at Svendsen's the confectioner's, and Haakon wanted to impress me with his broad-minded talk. So he quoted that saying—and just as he did so he put sugar into his coffee—five lumps, if you please. He couldn't make out why I laughed so terribly—but when he did understand it was the end of our little love affair."

"You're a sweet little nun, I must say." Gerda smiled. "Yes, it's true, Thali. When you talk like that you remind me of those robust and optimistic sisters I've come across in the Anglican and Catholic hospitals over there. They, too, flatly refuse to abandon their hope of humanity. In your case at any rate, it was a shame that papa and mamma brought us up on a non-religious diet—a dose of religion would have made you a little chubbier about the soul. As it is you're just as serious as a sister in veil and wimple, but you lack the sense of humour they generally have."

Nathalie laughed loudly: "I! My dear—what I lacked when we were children and young girls I got when I came to know Sigurd. I don't believe any religion could have supplied that want. And since I've been married to him I've never felt any want of—— Even if I've wished for one thing and another that I couldn't get, but we all do that; however much we have, our wishes go beyond it. But I've felt so many times that I had my fill of happiness, and nobody can ask more than that."

Gerda nodded: "I guessed that, all that time in Oslo. That for you love was a substitute for religion."

Nathalie laughed as she recalled it: "'You look as if you'd been to communion,' I remember your saying one night when I came home late."

"It's lucky Sigurd's so constituted that it's comparatively safe to make a household deity of him. As a rule the worship of man turns out the most expensive of religions in the long run——"

"Household deity—that sounds awful. Why must you always say such horrid things?"

"Well, but he does give one the impression of having been worshipped long and well. No, joking apart, Thali—Sigurd's all right, he can stand being spoilt as he has been."

The lights of a car came rushing towards them on the road; it swung off into the parsonage drive.

"So we shall get off with one glass of that wine of hers," said Gerda.

They stood for a moment looking over the lake. The streak of moonlight was now broad and bright, bordered by scattered glitterings. A solitary black dot of a swimming wild duck stirred the belt of silver—and there was a sudden splashing and shuffling among the reeds.

"What if we should never come here again." Gerda sighed. "Then we shall have spent our last evening in winding up the estate——"

"——So the young people have been for a regular ramble in the moonlight," said Fru Andreassen, excusing them. "And indeed your mamma and I have enjoyed it too; we sat out in the veranda a good while looking at the moon, to the accompaniment of a most delightful concert on the radio——"

Nathalie woke next morning under the way of a dream. She closed her eyes and tried to lure the visions back before the memory of them had faded away—some of them had been so beautiful——

——She had been travelling in a train and something had gone wrong with it. In company with a whole lot of people she didn't know—passengers no doubt—she found herself on a bridge; below her through a network of iron girders she could look down on water and sandy bluffs, and towards the south there was a view over a broad valley filled with light mist through which the sun was breaking. Above the mist dark knolls and low ridges projected. Then the vision changed. She and all the strangers were in a railway-cutting, starting to climb up one of the slopes. Thin grass and dark autumnal heather grew on it.

Then they were somewhere in Österdal—it looked like the fir-clad heath at the bottom of the valley which they had to cross in going from Rafstad to the opposite ridge where the road to the sæter ran. She crossed the railway line too in her dream, but did not see the river. In the middle of the heath they came to a big bright timber building with lots of verandas and towers, and she knew it was the station hotel. But inside there were lofty rooms with marble columns and gilding and glass chandeliers everywhere, and huge mirrors on the walls—it was like the theatre foyers of the 'seventies and 'eighties. Sigurd was to be here, she knew, but she could not find him in her dream. And all at once she was inside another hotel, a regular Norwegian country hostelry: there was a room full of little tables with red check cotton cloths, and on the tables stood tin trays with empty bottles and glasses, and coats and wraps were hanging over the

wooden chairs. Here again she searched for Sigurd, and then she came up to a bedroom with walls of unpainted boarding and narrow beds with piles of bedclothes under the shadow of the sloping roof. Gerda stood there hanging up her coat on one of those rows of pegs that travelling pedlars sell—a board covered with red velvet and fitted with china knobs to hang the clothes on. Then she must have waked.

Nathalie stretched luxuriously. She liked so much having these dreams where the scenes changed and were distinct. She was going home this evening, and she looked forward to it. It would be good to get back to her work, and to Sigurd. It must have been that that had made her dream she was searching for him.

CHAPTER FOUR

NATHALIE had a busy time when she returned from her unexpectedly long visit to her home. Fortunately business was fairly quiet, but they had to prepare for the tourist season. Generally Sigurd was already there when she let herself in in the evening. Sometimes he had put on a kettle for her and laid the table. That pleased her just as much each time. She went about humming to herself as she got supper ready and added all the things he had forgotten to put on the table.

"Look, Sigurd, isn't it fine!" She was in raptures over the old damask table-linen that her mother had given her on leaving. It came from Fru Söegaard's grandmother's trousseau, but had been used very little. Otherwise there were not many things from Sumarlide that the children cared to have. Mads and Sigurd had chosen a number of books. And Nikolai had surprised them all by asking for the hideous woodcuts of Björnson and Steen and the other old fellows from papa's study. "They have historical interest, you know," he said with an ambiguous smile.

One Sunday they went out in a body to look at the house on the Bundefjord, Sigurd and Nathalie and Asmund and Sonja with both the children.

Nathalie had been at Stranna several times, but she had never examined the place from the point of view of

He turned his head towards her with a rapid smile: "All right."

"It was a bore that Sverre couldn't come out with us. It's ages since we've seen anything of him. Have *you* seen him lately?"

Sigurd thought for a moment. "No."

"You say that so oddly. You haven't quarrelled, have you?"

"No—why should we? He's a good deal away from town just now. They're in full swing with the work on that sanatorium down at Holmekilen, amongst other things."

It had occurred to her that she might wear her old peasant's dress out at Stranna this summer. It was a pity it should lie there and never be worn. The last few years she had never even taken out their peasants' costumes when she aired the rest of the clothes in spring and autumn. What a nuisance if the moth had got into them——

One afternoon when she was alone at home she went up to the attic to fetch them. The golden evening sunlight shone in through the cracks in the wooden wall and the motes danced in its beams. Nathalie felt absurdly thrilled as she knelt before the coffin-shaped trunk, covered with dappled calf-skin. It had stood in a storehouse loft at Rafstad—her father-in-law laughed at Sigurd when he asked if he could have it. It was full of papers and books left by the old sheriff, and they had spent several evenings going through them. Now and then Sigurd had a story to tell, when they came upon names that reminded him of something he had heard—there was a great-grandfather of his who had taken part in the war, and some

famous big-game hunters, and several gipsies about whom he could tell ugly stories. And he told her of a shocking murder at Sandtröen in old days—a young girl and her stepfather had killed the old mother; they were executed when Sigurd's grandfather was a little boy, he had been and looked on at it. But then Sigurd had sent all the papers to a record office—that of Hamar diocese it must have been.

Above the things in the trunk lay a folded Vienna shawl. It was a good deal darned, but otherwise uncommonly handsome. She would take that down too—perhaps sew rings on it and use it as a door curtain.

And there, in a cardboard box squashed flat, were the dresses. They were yellow from lying by, but what lovely linen there was in them. Nathalie took them out piece by piece—the smell of camphor was intense, it made her perspire. It was frightfully hot up here under the roof and the air was close and laden with dust. It didn't look as if the things had come to any harm. There were the shoes, wrapped in pink tissue-paper. The silver buckles were supposed to have been made by one of Sigurd's ancestors at Tangen—he must have had some skill. The pattern of plaited ribbons was taken from French rococo buckles, she had seen things like it in museums. But the style had been very cleverly caught and imitated.

The silk handkerchiefs and the brooches lay in a birch-bark box. It was really a great shame that she had let them lie here in the attic all these years. Sigurd would have every reason to be annoyed with her, for the handkerchiefs and the big brooch had been his mother's, and she had inherited them from her mother. And what a fascinating brooch it was—the ring was shaped like a heart, with a crown and two birds at the top, and from it

dangled a shower of silver leaves and some pendants that looked like monograms reversed. It was tarnished now, but when freshly washed with silver soap the jewel had the softest white lustre.

The blue neck-cloth with a green border was Sigurd's.

Nathalie took out the man's dress. Wasn't it idiotic that it made her think of the scene in *Brand* where Agnes looks over the clothes of her dead child. She had howled so when once she had had to read Agnes's part at school that at last they sent her out of the room "to compose herself." And since then it had always brought tears to her eyes when she said those lines to herself.

The cap was crushed flat, poor thing, and the peak broken, but no doubt a hatter could put in a new stiffener. Two grey homespun jackets—the short coat with pewter buttons and the long coat with silver buttons and green piping at the seams. A waistcoat of linsey-woolsey with red stripes—heavens, how brave and handsome her boy had been in that get-up!

She took the rolled-up stockings in her lap, one pair of red and two pairs of natural wool. Nathalie stretched stocking after stocking along her arm; a hole in one heel —and some were worn thin. She would have to take them down—they had the same yarn in her shop.

Nathalie folded the man's clothes again and carefully replaced the camphor balls. Then she took her own things and went downstairs.

She felt so gay as she stood in her petticoat before the tall Empire mirror in the sitting-room—the biggest mirror they had in the house. First put on the shoes—ah, how pretty they were with the big curved buckles over a high instep. Then there was the dress. Now she saw that Sigurd's shirts were in the same box. She took one

out and held it against her cheek—oh, what times they had had in those days, when they danced together. Properly speaking the old folk-dances required a man to make a brave show—in that way they were more innocent, more naturally sexual so to speak, than modern dances. Why yes, in nature it was the part of the cock to plume himself and be seductive. And goodness, how spry and—yes, seductive—Sigurd had been when he danced. When he finally took her firmly by the waist and swung her high above the floor——

The linen sleeves were so good and cool against the skin. The band of the skirt had got too wide. Nathalie swung herself rapidly round a few times, making the skirt stand out like a dark-blue bell—there ought to have been a petticoat of bright red linsey-woolsey, she remembered now; where could it have got to? The joke was to make the red show underneath when the lady whirled round.

The apron ought to be tied on first, before the bodice was buttoned. Sigurd had trailed round the shops looking for a piece of silk that would do for an apron—for it had to be a bold check, and dark, but with some scarlet in it. At last they discovered this brown and black with bright red which he pronounced to be correct.

He had written to the country store at home for the smooth leaf-green stuff the bodice was made of. It was Louise who had got them to start weaving this stuff again in those parts. She must have grown a good deal thinner, Nathalie saw, as she buttoned it in front. For it was meant to fit closely to the figure from the shoulders to half-way down the hips. Actually, refined as this costume was, it clothed a woman decently from top to toe, and yet it let you see whether she had a strong and shapely body, fit

"Thank you very much! But we won't try that arrangement again, my friend. No, I'll find a person to come here and see to them."

He took up the whisky decanter. "How much?" and she went and held her finger against her glass; that was a custom of theirs; she always took the same quantity, neither more nor less. "Do you know, Thali, it's really rather humiliating—that you don't trust me even so far as watering your flowers while you're away."

"But my dear man!" Nathalie was just a little surprised at the tone in which he said it—as though it might be more than just his joke. "When you know how forgetful you are about trifles of this sort. It isn't a thing that—that I blame you for." But she thought that sounded awkward as she said it.

"No, that's sure—it's not your way to blame me for anything. Sometimes I wonder if you really——" He stopped short.

"——If I really what?" she asked anxiously. "What were you going to say?"

"Well. There are many things that you might reasonably be dissatisfied with. For instance, when the business went smash—and I was loafing about for the best part of a year. And was glad enough to take a job under others, in a company. And now you know as well as I do that it's extremely unlikely I shall ever have anything but a subordinate position. Of course I might get something more independent—but it would have to be out of town. But in the first place there are so many dogs after every bone nowadays, and I don't believe I'm the type that succeeds in that scramble. It would hardly be an improvement from a financial point of view either. If you had to give up your position."

"Is *that* it?" Nathalie asked slowly. She sat smoothing out the silk apron over her lap. "You're not happy—about your work? Or the conditions you're working under——?"

"It depends. In a way my position's quite a good one. As times go I ought rather to think myself lucky to be as well off as I am. It isn't *that* exactly. But you know, when we got married I had different ideas. I didn't think we should always go on in the same way. I with my work and you with yours which we went to every morning and afternoon, and the rest of the time living together just as if—well, if it hadn't been for what people would say we might just as well have lived together without being publicly married."

"I wasn't the one who fussed about getting married."

"No, I haven't forgotten that. It was I—for I thought, supposing it should turn out that we were obliged to get married, as they say. It seemed quite intolerable that anyone should have an excuse for saying beastly things about you. I was so—overwhelmed—at finding that any woman could be so—proud and free and entirely without calculation, in the way you showed that you were fond of me and relied on me. Absolutely. You know what I mean, I'd always thought, though God knows why, but we men who come to town without knowing any one there generally fall in with a different kind of town girl, you know. I would never have believed that a girl who let a man have her without asking for a single word of guarantee could be anything but light-minded. And I couldn't bear that any one who might say nasty things about us should poke his nose into our affairs.

"But then I never expected this state of things to be anything but temporary. I took it for granted that our

yet there seems to be a living to be made at Rafstad. Or I might have gone in for forestry too. I had lots of talks with Nikolai. That isn't a very rich livelihood either, but—— Or I might have done as Martin Komperud did and cleared out when we went smash. I meant to tell you, I met somebody who had news of him lately. He's still in Australia. He doesn't seem to be getting on very brilliantly, but he jogs along somehow. I too had an idea of emigrating at that time. There were still some places then that one could emigrate to. South America, for instance. Or I might have gone to Australia too."

"You've never said a word to me about this before——"

"No. I should have had to go out first, you see. And somehow I couldn't imagine you either in such rough surroundings. As for leaving you behind here—when I couldn't even do anything for you but should have to let you look after yourself as you did before we were married—well, for that matter you've done it ever since. Young and pretty as you were and accustomed to have a man, and fairly passionate in that way. We had been married just two years, if we count the first unofficial time. I thought it was simply too risky to go away and leave you for an indefinite time."

"You needn't have thought of that," said Nathalie hotly. "If you had spoken *one* word to me about any such plans."

"I know very well what *you* would have answered. And I know that you're faithful by nature. I've never thought—at least I've never been able to imagine it—that you would take any notice of other men in *that* way while you were living with one you were fond of. But it's another matter when one is forced by circumstances to

separate. I don't mean anything like 'out of sight, out of mind.' But when two people who are fond of one another are together every day—— All the little chance contacts in the course of the day—not only caresses and the like, but such things as reaching out for the same thing or barging into one another in the hall and begging pardon—these form a kind of airy envelope around a couple which it is physically impossible for a third person to penetrate. Not without long and determined efforts anyhow. But when that physical contact is broken, why then a chance may be enough to bring about what one never thought could happen—it is sufficient to have a moment's absence of mind. And it is impossible to foresee what it may lead to."

He got up, went over to the flower-box again and fingered the petunia—took out his handkerchief and wiped his fingers.

Above the roofs the sky was a pale blue, but the creeper hanging from the roof stood out black against the sky, and the flowers in the box and the man standing with his back to her were indistinctly outlined in the twilight. Nathalie felt that it was getting chilly.

"If I'd only known that you had such ideas in your head! But it never occurred to me. I thought it was a question of principle—and because it was your nature—that made you stay and face all the unpleasantness and meet the firm's engagements as far as you could. So if you imagine I ever reproached you for anything that happened at that time—I never did such a thing, Sigurd! I knew very well it was Komperud's fault that things were so bad. And I was glad I hadn't yet given up my job, for I thought it would make it easier for you than if you had had me to provide for. Besides"—her voice

grew sharper—"I really believed you had had quite enough of your partnership with Martin Komperud. The last thing that would have occurred to me was that you should be thinking of following him abroad and joining him again!"

"That wasn't exactly what I was thinking of either. But it's so long ago now that I don't remember very clearly what I did think. Only I have the impression that I would rather have gone abroad, but I dared not leave you. No, as for joining Komperud again, I certainly had no idea of doing that. Although—when you say it was mostly his fault that the business went to hell, that is not altogether true. I needn't have been such a damned ass as not to keep a better eye on things when I had him for a partner. I knew Martin Komperud well enough, you may be sure. But God knows how it was—he had a sort of power over me. So that when we were together I couldn't help trusting him, though I was firmly convinced that one could never rely on him. Do you understand that?"

Nathalie shook her head. "He didn't give me that impression."

"His wife's married again, I've heard," said Sigurd after a while.

"My dear, that's very stale news. She has a boy who's in the same class as Maiken. Hilda Komperud was not the sort that one would expect to sit and wait for him. Even a name like that—I should think that was almost a good enough reason for taking another, simply to escape being called Fru Komperud."

"Do you think you could have fallen in love with me just the same if my name had been Komperud?"

"No, Sigurd!" She laughed, got up and took his

arm. "Come along, we'll go in, I'm beginning to shiver. Well, some people ask odd questions. I really believe I might have fallen in love with you all the same—but I should have worked hard to get you to change your name."

She switched on the light and drew the curtains across the door to the veranda. "There's another bottle of soda—won't you have a final drink?"

"No, thanks." He stood watching her as she cleared away the dress she had thrown off. "But don't you remember that you ought to have red stockings to go with that costume? Woollen stockings anyhow. Silk stockings are not in the style."

"Oh, I expect they all wear silk stockings in those parts nowadays. But I dare say woollen ones will be quite useful if there are snakes about."

"You look stunning in that get-up, Thali." He said it with such warmth that for a moment all other impressions were drowned in delight. But she answered him dryly and airily:

"Yes, don't you think so? And it's now almost the prettiest of all the Norwegian national costumes. This leaf-green bodice, you know"—she drew herself up to let her bust expand. "And anything so becoming as the black cap with the handkerchief round it——"

As he said no more she took up the cardboard box.

"I found your shirts in this. I'll have them washed with my own things—they've gone so yellow.

"——I say. Would you like me to bring down your suit one day? If you'd care to look at it. Won't you try it on—for fun?"

"I shouldn't be able to get it on now," he answered with hesitation. "And then—we've left all that sort of

thing so far behind us. It would make me feel as if we were a pair of those dolls you put in the window in the tourist season if I put it on."

"But really, Sigurd—how was it that we got so completely out of the way of all that? For you must admit we had gorgeous times in that local club of yours. Lots of cheery sociable people——"

"You were quite out of place there—but I expect I noticed that more than you. You liked dancing with me, but you didn't really care for all the rest of it. Do you remember for one thing when we started a paper——?

"As far as that goes, I myself came to think there was something—artificial about it. Louise dragged me into all that business of country dances and national dress and hurdy-gurdies and the rest of it. I was so gone on her that everything she did or said was like a revelation in my eyes. Well, no harm came of it either—I dare say it kept me out of a lot of mischief. Even if I wasn't exactly a saint, as you know. So it never came to more than an occasional sideslip, while I trotted after my lodestar and looked up to her. But you understand, when I fell seriously in love with a real flesh and blood woman who was ready to be my girl in a regular way—then all this that was mixed up with Louise seemed so artificial. For don't you see, Thali—they'd given up that sort of thing in my part of the country long before my time. I've never seen a man going about in the old dress. And after all it can't be so out-and-out national and Norse-Norse; it's only the men's clothes of Holberg's time imitated in homespun cloth. It was you by the way who told me that, Thali. I do remember a few old women wearing the black cap and the silk handkerchiefs; at any rate Grandmother Tangen wore them when she went to

church. But apart from her there were only one or two of the old cottage folk or the people of the mountain farms in the north of the parish who might possess a long green coat or a blue gown. No, you see, I realized as I grew older that all these things that Louise went in for belonged to a time that is past. It wasn't altogether a good time either—it was hard in many ways. Though I'm quite ready to believe that on the whole people knew better how to keep up their spirits and enjoy life when they had a chance. But it's naïve to think one can bring back that state of things simply by putting on the old costumes and dancing the old dances to the old tunes—unless one can recapture the frame of mind which gave rise to it all when it was new and up to date."

Nathalie took the rug off the divan and began putting the soft cushions into the white pillow-slips. "Oh no, I'm really getting rather cold. It's late too. What time must you get up in the morning?"

"Asmund said he would start at half-past eight. So he won't be here before nine at the earliest. We needn't get up any earlier than usual.

"——I was going to ask by the way if I might sleep in here to-night?"

"You may indeed." Nathalie laughed.

He clasped her passionately in his arms. "I was thinking of that too when I changed my mind and didn't take the train. Turn round now," he said, still holding her round the waist: "then I'll untie your handkerchief at the back——"

CHAPTER FIVE

FROM the very first Nathalie had a feeling that this stay on the Bundefjord meant hard work rather than holiday both for Sigurd and herself.

They moved out on July 8th; on the same day Sonja left on a motor tour with a woman friend. Before leaving she gave Nathalie an enthusiastic description of how marvellous it was at Stranna. A powerful odour of the scent she used, which neither Sigurd nor Nathalie liked, hung about the bedroom after she had gone. They left the veranda door open day and night when the weather was fine, but when they had to close it the smell of Sonja returned.

Sonja might well be delighted with Stranna; she was not obliged to go in to Oslo oftener than she chose. But by the time they came out on week-days that side of the fjord was in shadow. The mornings were charming, so Nathalie took to getting up earlier than she need have done on account of the boat. She ran down to the sea in a bathing-dress and had a swim in the morning sun. Sigurd went with her now and again, but he had never bathed in the sea till he was grown up and he didn't care for it as she did.

Morning coffee on the veranda was grand. And the boat trip to town was fine in good weather. The fjord lay pale and bright, and the islands with all the little

coloured summer cottages on the knolls looked so happy and innocent. Within the framework of its hills the town lay in a mist of its own exhalations. Its distant hum grew louder as they approached, one noise after another detached itself and rang out, till the boat came alongside the quay and the passengers poured into the rumble of traffic and the roar of the town. They arrived so early that Nathalie had time to do her shopping before going to the office; she went round by the market square and strolled up and down through the sea of flowers surrounding the nurserymen's vans.

But when lunch time came she was already fearfully sleepy. It roused her to have something to eat. But the last hours of work were hard to get through. Sometimes she woke with a start and discovered that she had fallen asleep in her office chair.

They made good resolutions about going to bed early, but they were seldom kept. Maiken and Gary could not be got to bed in reasonable time. They were accustomed to have supper with the grown-ups when either of their parents was at home for an evening, and so of course they wanted to sit up for supper with Aunt Thali and Uncle Sigurd. And they were so sweet that it was tempting to let them have their way. Sigurd always got on so well with children, but that summer Gary had transferred all his affection to Aunt Thali. There was an open fire-place in the living-room, and not an evening went by without the children imploring Sigurd to light a fire, "only just a tiny bit with a few little sticks." Gary was irresistible when he produced the little bundle of twigs he had picked up for firewood. And when Sigurd gave in and put a match to it, the little boy climbed up into her lap and generally went to sleep at once, cuddled against her

bosom. He would be four in August. Maiken was eight and quite ready to flirt with Sigurd.

Of course when they were sitting by the fire like this with the children she could not help thinking—they ought to be ours! Sigurd no doubt thought the same. But neither of them ever uttered the thought.

When at last the children were put to bed they insisted absolutely that Aunt Thali must come up and hear them say their prayers. "Mother always does when she's at home," Maiken asserted. "Well, but when she's out," objected Nathalie, "then you can say them without anybody hearing." Nathalie didn't like this evening prayer ceremonial. Sonja held that children ought to say their evening prayers—they look so charming when they do it. But neither Asmund nor she was the sort of person who could make this the foundation of any essential idea in the minds of the children when they grew up. It was purely and simply a game which would be dropped when they grew so big that there was no longer any charm about their saying their prayers.

Not but what Sonja did believe in God after a fashion, as Nathalie had guessed. She was offended with him when she thought she was getting too little out of her life—none of the things she wanted. At such times she couldn't imagine what she had done wrong, that she should always be so dull and bored. And when she had done something about which her conscience was not quite clear, she would sometimes appeal to God as a sort of umpire: she was sure he understood her, there wasn't anything wrong in it, one must have a little fun while one is young.

Gerda said that people had become less fit for life since religion had lost its power over them. There was

certainly a good deal in that. But there are some forms, both of religion and of fitness for life, which are not very attractive.

"If mother can't hear us we generally forget them," Maiken explained, when Nathalie had already forgotten her question. "But if you'll hear me it'll be such fun to say my prayers."

"Yes, but it's God you're to say your prayers to, Maiken. And he'll hear you just as well if there isn't any grown-up with you."

Maiken looked as if this was something that had never occurred to her before.

Sigurd too was ordered upstairs for kissing good night. Maiken and Gary had been trained to kiss far more than was necessary, in Nathalie's opinion. But perhaps this was more Asmund's fault—he had such a way of petting his children.

When at last the little ones had gone to sleep they sat on by the fire downstairs. She was thinking that they had to get up early next morning, and presumably Sigurd thought the same. He looked fearfully tired. But neither of them had the energy to make a move.

Sometimes Sigurd proposed that they should take an evening walk. Nathalie could not bring herself to say no —he wanted much more exercise than he got. But as a rule they were very late in starting. Going up through the wood it was quite dark, but when they came out on the high ground the intense pale light of the summer night which burst upon them from the vast open sky seemed as strange as ever. The road led between fields whose corn had a greyish green look in the twilight, and the ripe grain had a gleam of its own in the pale light when a puff of wind swayed the stalks. On both sides the

meadowsweet showed white in the ditches and scented the air. They passed a couple of farms. At the first there was usually a light in the kitchen windows and the radio was going. At the other farm they evidently went to bed earlier.

The road entered the wood again and after walking a little way they came to a sheet of water. There was something mournful about it, at that late hour at any rate. At the end where they sat the banks were sheer rock, not very high. They sat on a shelf of the rock a little above the water and smoked a cigarette before turning to go home. Under the shore it was black as coal, but farther out the little tarn mirrored the light of the sky with great dark patches of water-lilies floating on the clear surface.

In the daytime when the sun was shining and the white flowers were opened wide the tarn was very different. They had gone there with Gary and Maiken the first Sunday they were at Stranna, and the children were quite wild about all these water-lilies. So Nathalie promised that next Sunday when they came here she would put on her bathing-dress under her clothes and swim out to get some. Sigurd protested—it was dangerous to swim where there were water-lilies. "Not a bit, if one knows how to go about it." Gary and Maiken gazed at her in admiration.

But next Sunday Fru Ulbricht came out. The children were fond of their grandmother; she always brought them quantities of cakes. Nathalie found her pleasant. But there could be no question of getting this corpulent person up to the water-lily tarn. Instead they went for a row before dinner, and after dinner they played boccia under the fir-trees in the little yard. They got through

that Sunday pretty well. Sigurd too liked Fru Ulbricht in a way. But on the following Saturday she rang up to say that she would like to come out to-morrow, if she might, and in that case her husband wanted to come too, it was so long since he had seen his grandchildren.

Nathalie hardly dared to tell Sigurd when they met on the boat. And evidently it put him in the blackest of humours, though he did not say much. In fact, he scarcely said one word the rest of the evening. At times she really wished he could have taken annoyances of this sort rather more in her father's way—cursed and stormed for a while and then have done with it. The other way was more oppressive in the long run.

In the course of the night they were waked by a rising wind, so strong that they had to close the door to the balcony. Nathalie got up to shut the children's window. The waves were breaking on the beach with a white belt of foam in the darkness and she recognized the familiar roar of stones and shingle rolling in the surf. She stood listening for a moment; it was so home-like. She enjoyed it. There was a roaring and crashing in the trees round the house, and then the rain came streaming down. She looked forward to bathing in the morning—but of course Sigurd wouldn't go out in such weather—she smiled at the thought—and the children mustn't be allowed to. Oh, if only they hadn't had visitors coming——

The rain poured down when they woke next morning, and the Bundefjord was in an uproar: great waves, brown with sand, dashed upon their little beach, thundering as they broke in white foam. Farther out white crests chased each other over the grey-green water; the land on the other side could scarcely be seen in the thick

weather. Nathalie rushed down between two squalls and bathed from the boat pier—Sigurd stood in the veranda meanwhile. "You're mad!" he said as she ran past him laughing, in her dripping bathing-dress, and Maiken and Gary began to howl because they weren't allowed to bathe too.

The Ulbrichts were not on the eleven o'clock boat. Sigurd came back from the pier and flung off his drenched rain-coat, angry at having had to go out for nothing in such foul weather. Nathalie went down to the midday boat—if they happened to come by that it would look so silly if nobody was there to meet them. It was a brisk walk through the wood, she liked this weather. And the Ulbrichts hadn't come. So all might have been well. If it hadn't been for the dinner—she had bought a piece of veal, as most people like it, and she had made a liberal estimate, thinking that most likely they would troop up with one or two more of the family in tow. So now they would be left with masses of meat on their hands, and as it happened neither she nor Sigurd was enthusiastic about cold veal. The children might have all the strawberry pie they could eat—it wouldn't do them any harm to have a tummy-ache for once in a way.

It was annoying on Norma's account too, she had had such a lot of extra trouble for nothing. And she was such a capable and pleasant girl. Of course Nathalie couldn't quite help thinking of all the things that *might* go wrong at Stranna while she was away in town. But with Norma she could at any rate feel at ease about the children.

After dinner they made up a good fire, and Nathalie got out Sverre's concertina. As a girl it had been her speciality to appear at gatherings as an adept on this instrument. "Dance with Maiken, won't you, Sigurd?

I think you ought to take a hand in her education in that line——"

The children were given heaps of strawberry pie again for supper, and afterwards they played beggar-my-neighbour, but for Gary's sake they called it bridge and had strips of paper on which they wrote figures. Gary could already write several figures, and that evening he succeeded in making a proper 2.

She stayed behind to put the room straight after Sigurd had gone upstairs. She heard his steps on the floor above, but then there was silence. Nathalie listened and listened. In the ordinary way he made a good deal of noise as he undressed.

She lifted the hanging lamp out of its ring, but stood with it in her hand without putting it out. Her anxiety suddenly came on her like a torment, she was getting worn out with resisting its pressure. Good heavens, what is it that's wrong with him, why can't he tell me? Then she screwed down the wick and blew out the lamp.

It was dark in the bedroom when she opened the door. She made out his figure standing by the glass door. "But I say—haven't you lit the lamp?"

"I managed to smash the chimney. Confounded nuisance with these oil lamps——"

"I'll go down and find another—they're in the drawer under the corner cupboard, don't you remember?"

"Oh no, never mind—it isn't worth the trouble."

Nathalie lit the candles on both the bedside tables. The flames flickered wildly—there was a good deal of draught up here in stormy weather.

She went up and laid her hand on his shoulder:

"Do you know what, Sigurd? I believe you ought to stay in town for a week or so. The fact is you're getting

connubial bedroom for once. But there was something, not in her head nor in her heart, but as it were deeper in her very flesh, which had always forbidden her to make use of any erotic means in order to gain petty selfish or commonplace ends. She wouldn't begin it now either—would not entice him over to her and try to coax out of him what he was unwilling to tell her. For one thing, it wasn't certain that she could do so now.

"Is it *me* you're tired of, Sigurd?" she asked abruptly. "At any rate you can answer me that.

"Do I *worry* you without knowing it?" she asked again, when he did not answer at once.

His features looked relaxed in the flickering light of the single candle; the flame was reflected fitfully in his pupils. Those horrid pyjamas of his with the broad purple stripes had been bought at Bodö; he had had to get a set on the journey, and they could find nothing better.

"Oh no, Thali, it's not that," he said quietly. "And I must say you oughtn't to have any reason to think so," he went on with more animation. "Don't you think we've been fond of each other out here—just as much as any time before——?"

That was true. In a way. At times they had been—happy together—for *that* was what he meant. But all at once she felt some uncertainty even here—hadn't it been something that flared up in him in between his long spells of dejection and general disgust with life? Then he had come to her as though he would try to reconquer—not her, for God knew he had never had to do that—but something which had once existed and had been lost.

"I don't know if you can understand what I mean," he

said suddenly. "I am fond of you, Thali, you can't have any doubt of that. But don't you ever have a feeling that in the long run there crops up now and again—well, it isn't a dissatisfaction exactly nor a misunderstanding either. But don't you feel too at times that our lives were so different—we were exposed to such different influences, I'll put it that way—in all the years before we met, that the current may be switched off between us all at once? Well no, you mustn't think I mean any of that sentimental nonsense about failure to understand one another and all that. But it does happen that I see you double as it were—as when one squints"—he tried to laugh. "This morning, for instance, you came dashing up from the sea in nothing but your bathing dress and laughed as you ran past me in the veranda, and then you ran on through the whole house, leaving a wet track behind you—Norma was there laying the table, and the children stood gaping at you——"

"But good heavens!" said Nathalie, taken aback; she felt inclined to laugh too.

"Well, that's what I say, you can't understand it. Of course I think it's all right—but you know, until I came to town I should never have dreamt of people doing such things! Well, I'm not saying that there aren't a lot of things which *we* think can be done, but which might shock *you*. I won't pretend that one set of habits is better than the other, but simply that the kind of thing that was natural to one in one's youth has a firm hold on one, even if we afterwards learn to look upon other people's customs as just as good in themselves. Perhaps it was a kind of inferiority feeling too"—again he laughed quietly and cheerlessly—"that brought this up in me. You lay bobbing like a cork and letting the water break all over

you, you looked as if you'd never enjoyed yourself so much, while the devil himself wouldn't have driven me out in such weather——

"——It was so often like that in our early days too. When you said quite off-hand things that sounded pretty risky in my ears. I had always imagined that women who said such things could only be girls of a certain class or else the smart depraved town ladies about whom we used to hear so many queer stories. But from the very first time I saw you I had enough gumption to know that you were—well, everything that a man can look up to and fall in love with and admire. And I did that all the time, you must know—all the more as you—took my breath away time after time with your audacity, as though you didn't know what it was to be afraid or diffident. Later on, of course, I came to see that this loose talk was a thing that you and Gerda had put on to tease your mother and father, as they were everlastingly preaching freedom of thought and in reality had never dreamt of any mother's son desiring other liberties than those for which they were agitating. I was not such a fool that I couldn't see *that*. But you know that I and my brothers and sisters would never have thought of speaking to our father or mother in that way. It wasn't that we didn't criticize them often in our own minds, and when it came to the point perhaps we were more likely to do as we pleased than you were. But as to opposing them in words—no. I don't believe we should have thought of doing that——

"——But what I was going to say—I was thinking that you must often have had the same feeling—that a momentary squint came over your eyes when you looked at me——?"

"I understand what you mean," said Nathalie after a pause. She took his hand. "Good night now, Sigurd. I'm going to put out the light, and then we'll try to get to sleep."

In the darkness she felt that he raised himself slightly and bent towards her. Her heart stopped still in expectation—a gust of wind that died away at the same moment seemed like her to be holding its breath. His hand was feeling for her face, then he kissed her lightly and cautiously and lay back in his bed.

A moment after he was breathing regularly, asleep. Nathalie lay listening to the wind that raged round the house and the roar of the sea and the moaning of the trees. It was not blowing quite so hard now.

He is nervous, she thought—there must be *something* on his mind besides, but it's mostly nerves. She did not even realize how fervently she hoped that it might be mostly nerves. Underneath lay the certitude, heavy as lead: he had been up to something, and it was another woman. One who had turned his head. This Gaarder girl, she must have been flirting with him—laying bare her little mind and confiding to him her ideas about the capital which was so inhospitable to rustic students, even when they were charming girls—and about country folk and townsfolk who could never understand one another, and folk from the coast and folk from the mountains who were two different races. And then perhaps this flirtation of theirs had gone so far that looking back on it he was filled with rustic contrition. At heart the worthy Sigurd was extremely conservative in that way. And in general that was quite a good thing, but now and again there was no harm in a man being able to take some things rather more lightly. But she hoped, oh, how she hoped, that it

was mostly physical. Something a doctor could deal with——

She thought she had just fallen asleep when the alarum-clock went off. She had a violent headache. The wind had gone down, but the fjord was dark and grey with white crests of foam—they would get well shaken up on the way to town. She didn't mind that, rather the contrary. But Sigurd took it as an insult if the sun did not shine uninterruptedly while he was afloat. That was odd, for in the mountains he took no notice of the weather.

This morning however he seemed much calmer. They did not talk much, but were at ease in each other's company as they walked through the dripping wood down to the pier. It was shocking to see what the storm had done to all the pretty gardens along the front—the people who had villas there took so much trouble with them.

"Well, then I'll do as you said and stay a few nights in town," he said almost gaily as they went ashore. "Then perhaps we can meet for lunch sometimes. At all events I'll ring you up the first thing every morning."

But in the afternoon he rang up to say that Asmund wanted to come out that evening, and so he would come too. "But you needn't do that," said Nathalie. "Well, no, but—it won't be very amusing for you to have to entertain Asmund by yourself all the evening."

CHAPTER SIX

THERE was some trouble between Sigurd and Asmund too. They had been so curiously snappish the last few times she had seen them together. The idea had been that Asmund should come out once a week or so. A couple of times he had announced his visit, but something had always prevented him.

"It's a bore that you should be so unlucky in the weather," Nathalie said by way of making conversation, "now that at last you're able to come." It was a nasty trip on the boat; they sat under the lee of the deck-house, but there was no shelter to speak of. The drizzling rain and the flying scuds came slanting, the wind caught their clothes so disgustingly, the boat rolled incessantly. The islands with their little villas were washed out and colourless in the misty rain, the opposite shore was scarcely visible.

"Perhaps we'd better go below," one or other of the brothers proposed from time to time, but the saloons were overcrowded.

Hardly anybody came down to meet the boat. The little piers which usually swarmed with ladies in flowered beach pyjamas, boys and girls in bright jumpers, now stood deserted with shiny wet planks, and the ground behind was ploughed up by streams of rain-water. The passengers scurried ashore, crouching with their parcels under umbrellas. Nobody in the bathing sheds, nobody

on the boat piers, where skiffs and cutters, wet and abandoned, danced and tugged at their moorings. The bathing huts stood glaring out at the rain with their little windows. Ugh, it was quite autumnal.

"It's really too far from the pier," remarked Asmund Nordgaard, as they struggled up the path through the wood. The dripping from the trees was far worse than the rain itself; fir-needles had been washed into little drifts and the ground was slippery. "When bad weather sets in."

"It is rather far," Nathalie admitted, "when one has to go to town every day. For those who don't have to it's ideal."

The children were down on the beach. They ran out on the sand after the retreating wave, then fled screaming up to the belt of seaweed as the next wave curved and splashed them as it broke. There was a piece of wood washing backwards and forwards, and they were trying to get hold of it.

Their expression on discovering the three grown-ups gripped at Nathalie's heart, so charming did it seem—as though they did not know them at first, being entirely taken up with their game. They stood staring in a strange absent-minded way; their little faces were red as fire and their hair was plastered in dark strands under the shining wet sou'westers. Then they came running up with the water squelching in their rubber boots; they looked like two little sea-trolls. "Have you brought us anything nice, Father?" asked Maiken sagaciously.

Norma was laying the table, and Asmund went for her at once, without any greeting: "——Can't understand what you're thinking of, Fröken Eriksen, letting the children run down to the beach by themselves in this

weather. If anything had happened to them you couldn't have heard it in the kitchen—if they'd shrieked ever so loud you couldn't possibly have heard anything——"

Norma was in a bad temper when Nathalie came in with her parcels. There were no waves now to speak of, and the children had been perfectly impossible all day; poor little things, they couldn't bear being kept in any longer. Norma had not received word that the gentlemen were coming out to supper; Nathalie had telephoned to the store, but the message had not been passed on.

"I'm sorry about that, Norma; I couldn't help it. Now I'll take the children upstairs and change their things, if you'll kindly lay for two more. We have enough food in the house, thank goodness!" Norma slapped all the rest of the congealed gravy into the saucepan.

Clean clothes were running short—the last washing had not been dried yet. Nathalie found in a drawer some freshly ironed pyjamas for the children. "You'll have to come down to supper in pyjamas." They thought this such incredible fun that they began chasing each other and kicking their slippers all over the room. "No, Maiken and Torgal, you're to go downstairs to your father before you make a regular mess of yourselves——"

She herself had nothing to change to but the peasant's dress.

"Oh, look at this!" Asmund Nordgaard clapped his hands in pretended admiration. "Have you been getting a national costume, Thali?"

"Oh no, it's the old one. I wear it out here on Sundays," she said with a touch of annoyance.

"I see; yes. Isn't that"—he came nearer—"that's mother's old brooch, isn't it? When did you get that?"

"You know very well Nathalie's had that ever since we were engaged." Sigurd was irritated—it was just as though he didn't like her having put on this dress, Nathalie noticed. She felt uncomfortable—once more there was something the matter, and she did not know what it was.

The children made all the noise they could while they sat at table, and the grown-ups joined in the noise so as not to show that they were out of humour. When they had finished the meal Sigurd made up the fire. The children climbed up on to their father's knees. "Now you're going to play the concertina to us, Auntie Thali," Maiken commanded. "Haven't time, my friend—first I must help Norma, so that we can get rid of the supper things some time——"

But when she came back from the kitchen it was time to put Gary and Maiken to bed. They protested, and their father was inclined to support them. Nathalie made an end of the discussion. "They'll only catch cold. Feel"—she put her hand to Torgal's cheek, which was blazing from the heat of the fire. Asmund gave in at once; he was rather hypochondriacal on his own account and very much so where the children were concerned.

Asmund opened the bottle of whisky he had brought with him. There was no soda in the house and the well water was quite brown after the rain. There was nothing to be done about it.

Nathalie dawdled up in the night-nursery. She heard the men's voices down below all the time—now they seemed to be quarrelling again; what a bore. At last the children were in their beds. From sheer habit she carried the slop-pail down, went round to the front of the house and emptied it over the unhealthy bed of phlox which

Sverre had planted along the veranda. While the weather was so dry she had given them all the dirty water.

She went up into the veranda. They had opened one of the windows. Nathalie heard Asmund say in a loud and angry voice:

"——But you're so cursed slack that one would think you were getting downright feeble-minded! I'm damned if I understand what *any* of them can see in you——"

She could not hear Sigurd's answer. She saw that he was standing over by the fire, but the embers gave only a feeble glow, and the glare of the hanging lamp prevented her seeing the two men clearly. Nathalie did not even realize that she had stopped to listen.

"——What you're thinking of," Asmund's voice came again. "You can't just leave things to take their course——"

"Oh, they'll go the way they're meant to go——"

"——Meant to go!" Asmund snorted. "So you believe in destiny, do you?"

"I dare say I do," replied Sigurd defiantly.

"It would be a good deal more honest if you came out with it yourself, it seems to me." Then he said something which she couldn't catch. "——Must be less humiliating for you too—and for her—hearing it first from someone else. For you can take your oath she'll get to know of it sooner or later——"

Sigurd said something which she didn't hear; "——and if she doesn't ask questions, it must be because she doesn't *want* to know any more——"

Nathalie opened the door of the veranda. The two by the fire started. Evidently they had not expected her to come in that way.

"I was to ask you to go up and say good night to the

children," she said to Asmund, as she went on towards the kitchen with her pail. She stood there for a few moments—shrinking like a whipped dog from going back and sitting with them. But there was nothing else to be done. Then Sigurd appeared at the door.

He closed it behind him but did not come forward, and she stood by the dresser and did not move. She felt herself turning pale, so pale that her husband was bound to notice it—and that gave her a feeling that she was furious with him and nothing else. Humiliation, they were talking about—this was humiliation. She stood there, neither of them said anything. Something like a landslide occurred, within her or between them. And yet she could see something in his attitude that suggested he was seeking refuge——

And now Asmund was coming; his step was so heavy on the stairs.

"Are you coming in?" asked Sigurd in a low voice, as though begging her to do so. Nathalie nodded and went in with him.

Asmund had seated himself. Sigurd picked up the whisky bottle. "Shall I pour you out a drink, Thali?"

"No, thanks. You know, I don't like it without soda." She settled herself over by the dinner-table with her knitting. Then she discovered that her hands were so shaky that she was afraid the others would see it. She bent over the paper, pretending to study the directions. "The children are looking well, don't you think?"

"First-rate."

But almost at once the silence became so oppressive that Asmund pulled himself together and made conversation. "It's tiresome about the weather—for the children

as well. They ought to be out of doors as much as possible while they're here——"

"It's only been like this the last two days—and it's much quieter now. It was almost clear when I went out just now——"

The roar of the waves on the beach could be heard much more plainly after this. Nathalie bent over her paper and counted the stitches half aloud.

"Wonderfully industrious you always are, Thali," said Asmund.

She had chanced to sigh—but checked herself at once. "It's pleasant to have something to keep one's fingers busy. That's an advantage that we women enjoy, you know."

Neither of the others found anything to answer to that.

"So you've turned politician——" Oh, that wasn't a neutral topic either. But they *couldn't* sit here and say nothing at all. And she couldn't think of anything better at the moment. "You were speaking at Aamot on Saturday, I saw in the paper."

Asmund spread himself in his basket chair. "Yes. In times such as these we live in it's my opinion that it's the duty of every man to form an opinion on the state of affairs and then go in for it. That's just what I was pointing out to Sigurd here. Since even he can see that the old political parties have had their day. So it's a man's duty to make himself acquainted with the new ideas of the time and choose the ground he means to take——"

"Duty!" said Sigurd derisively. It struck Nathalie that the relations between the brothers were once more what they had been when she first knew Sigurd. Then he was

the younger brother, and Asmund was the heir, married to Louise—it was as though he descended from a mountain of primogeniture when he paid a visit to Oslo. When he moved to town as a grass-widower, with his wife eclipsed in an asylum, there was a change. Then he needed Sigurd as friend and companion; they met on an equal footing. And after his marriage to Sonja he needed his brother still more; Sigurd's hands were freer and he could help when Asmund was in difficulties. But now Asmund had resumed his place as elder brother and that with emphasis. There was this difference, that in old days Sigurd had accepted his brother's superiority with something like cheerfulness; he had been brought up to do so. Now he chafed under it. But it seemed as if the other had got him by the neck and meant to give him a ducking.

"I don't see how any one can have a duty to make himself acquainted with these things—a duty to try is all you can say. But if a question is such that every sensible person can see there must be factors contained in it which nobody knows at the moment—we can't say now whether any one may succeed in discovering them later, all we can see now is that they are there. In that case I should say it's a man's primary duty to admit: here I can't form any opinion, because what I can see of the question is just enough to tell me that there are forces at work of which at present we have no real knowledge——"

"We have to draw conclusions from the known to the unknown——"

"Yes, that sounds very fine. So long as you don't forget that there's a difference between what you know from real knowledge and what you believe as the result of your conclusions—so long as you remember that si-

conclusions are nothing more than suppositions. That's just what the countryman's old common sense consisted in, let me tell you—they knew how to keep those two things apart. That which they believed because they knew it and that which they believed as the result of their conclusions. Whereas such people for instance as—well, let me say my father-in-law and my mother-in-law, they had exactly the same belief in what they knew and what they merely conjectured, either as an inference or as a wish-fulfilment, and so on all through. Am I not right there, Nathalie?"

"Yes?" she said in surprise. What had come over the man? How he had taken to moralizing lately——!

"Yes, it would be a charming state of things if everybody tried to argue like that!" Asmund was indignant. "Then the whole course of the world would be brought to stagnation, if nobody dared to deduce from what one knows to what is probable——"

"I didn't say one ought not to do so. I said one ought always to bear in mind what's what. That's what doctors do, for instance, if they're any good. The quacks are just those who don't do so."

"Then you think it's a kind of political quackery we go in for, we who think the time has come to raise a standard under which the whole nation may gather, irrespective of class interests and differences of education and so on. And get them to drop all that and feel that they're simply Norwegians."

"Nobody is simply Norwegian. Any more than anybody is simply proletarian or simply German or hundred per cent American or anything else *simply*. At any rate you'll never get me to believe it. The plain truth is we're all human beings, and that's more complicated."

"That's just the root of the matter, Sigurd—other national leaders *have* succeeded in getting millions of human beings to feel that they are simply proletarians or fascists or members of a nation. Our age has no time for complicated interpretations of humanity——"

"No, because life has become so complicated that one has to have intelligence and knowledge and honesty and good will simply to realize how difficult it is to find any threads one can take hold of before one can hope to disentangle any of the cat's-cradles. It's easier to try if one can hypnotize people into believing they are simply this or simply that—dope them in the long run with propaganda so that they never have peace to discover that they are lots of things besides what their leaders tell them. Not that I believe you and your friends will bring about anything of the kind in this country—as far as I can see you have nobody in the party who's sufficiently crafty or talented or reckless for that. Not yet in any case. That it can be done I'm willing to admit—when circumstances are favourable and the man who fits the situation is there and commands sufficient resources. In that case a policy of simplification of this sort may lead to a successful coup. Though I don't believe a coup results in anything but a state of things which leads to another coup sooner or later. But naturally the leaders have to try to hold their position as long as possible—to extirpate all such elements as they cannot convert, and then sing to the rest of the people as the Karelians used to sing to the bear they had brought down—you remember the *Kalevala*, don't you?"

"I can't say I do," said Asmund snappishly.

"You ought to. It was you who gave a lecture on the *Kalevala* in the young people's club at home. Louise had

been reading it with us, don't you remember that either——?

"Jumala, to thee be praises,
Thee, Creator, will I worship,
Since to me the bear thou gavest.
Golden booty of the forest!"
And he looked upon his darling,
Lifted up his voice and uttered:
"Thou my Otso, thou my dear one,
O thou honey-pawed, thou fairest,
Be not angry, even jesting!
For it was not I who felled thee;
Thou thyself didst slip and stumble,
Lurching through the boughs of pine-trees,
Shattering thy bony carcase,
Tearing thy grey coat on branches.
Do not grieve for this, my Otso;
Never shall thy fur be damaged,
Nor thy shaggy hide be taken
To make cloaks for wretched humans,
Miserable creatures' garments."
Whereupon old Väinämöinen
Stripped from off the bear his peltry,
Hung it high upon the storehouse,
Cast the flesh into the cauldron—"

"Well, I'm damned!" said his brother. "I never heard you quote poetry before. Is this something he's taken to lately, Nathalie?"

"Sigurd always had a knack of learning verse, you know. He used to know all the ballads we danced to in old days better than any one, don't you remember?" She turned red—it sounded so silly.

"Oh, I see." Asmund looked doubtfully at his sister-in-

law sitting there in her national dress. "Are you thinking —have you joined the club again then?"

"No, no."

Sigurd said impatiently: "I happened to think of this the other day, so I got the book out and read up this about the bear hunt. You ought to take a look at it too, there's much to be learnt from it for one who has political ambitions. First Väinämöinen tells a grand legend of how Otso was created by the fair daughters of Nature—the fine material they made him of and the golden cradle in which they rocked him under the blossoming pine-trees and so on. Then these daughters of Nature and Otso himself agree that he is to be a golden gift to trusty old Väinämöinen. And when he had flayed Otso and made soup of his flesh he ends by taking out the bear's fangs—

> Plucked the teeth out from his jawbone,
> Knee against his skull supporting
> Drew them out with hand of iron."

Asmund paused before answering. "I must say you have elevated ideas about—about—— You couldn't imagine by any chance that the men who are trying to find a way out of chaos and quagmire for their people might be actuated by other motives than flaying the bear and making soup of his flesh?"

"Hunting was the main thing with Väinämöinen, you know. Don't you remember, he's a poet? The great minstrel. He loved Otso honestly and sincerely and believed all that about his being created for his sake. So he stripped off the bear's pelt and tore the teeth out of his jaw."

"Of course it's always thrilling to take part in any

struggle for power—anything that decides the fate of nations. Men have always felt that, and they will do so as long as the world lasts."

"You were so scornful when you said that even I could see that the old party politics were played out. I'll tell you why I think so. They worked well enough so long as all the parties were agreed on the main thing—what it means to be a human being and what are the true values for all human beings. Then they could try turn and turn about which were the best methods of securing the most of such values for the people. Naturally they disagreed as to the proportions of these values to be allotted to each member of the community—and those who were in power at the moment always thought they had a right to extra rations for their trouble. Nevertheless this might work quite well, since all the parties were intent on promoting the welfare of the whole people, and at bottom there was no disagreement as to what constituted that welfare. Nor can anybody deny that so long as parliamentary government functioned things were ordered better and better, the laws grew fairer and the standard of living higher all along the line. Only now it doesn't function any longer, because now the parties are only agreed on a few secondary matters at most. It's the main thing that they're no longer agreed about."

"Well, let's hear what you think these main things are——"

"The main thing must surely be one's idea of what a human being *is*."

Asmund looked rather bewildered. But in a moment he was as patronizing as before. "Is that so? Now I should have thought there were several problems of today that are more important than that. Pacifism for in-

stance, or unemployment, or the future of the family——"

"Well, but don't you see," Sigurd persisted, "that one can't solve any of them unless one knows what one believes a human being to *be*. You can't do anything about the state of the family unless you have formed an opinion as to how far a human being is subject to the order of nature. Obviously nature's only idea in coupling individuals is to get them to produce young. It has arranged that some kinds of young shall eat their way out of an apple or the skin of a live cow, while for others the parents have to work themselves to death, and that's why we find that some animals think it so delightful to feed and lick their young that they're quite beside themselves if they lose them. And human beings find their delight in acting providence and exercising authority over their young. But if society is going to do all that for people's offspring and if we've discovered the art of avoiding children from whom we don't expect to get any entertainment—then I suppose some day there'll be so few of us and so many of the blacks and the yellow peoples that they'll come and settle the family question for us. Then perhaps they'll inherit the problem of unemployment—when men can make the same articles practically everywhere in the world, but in some places they *have* to be paid more for their work because they must have more solid houses and more lighting and heating and food and clothing than are required elsewhere. Then it may be their turn to wonder why they let the munition industry make more money than all the rest and why they allow themselves to be scared into giving it more and more to do. Then they can ask themselves—how can it be possible to rouse a warlike spirit in a whole nation by promising that it shall dictate the conditions of life to

another nation? And how is it that the other nation is equally determined to defend itself to the uttermost before allowing conditions to be imposed on it at the will of foreigners?"

"But that's exactly what we're driving at, man! We want to close the ranks on the defence question. And bring in a policy that will help the family. And provide employment for the whole people."

"Yes, that sounds very fine. But I don't see what can be the use of drawing up a programme like that unless you have a definite opinion about the main thing. You say you'll introduce a policy to help the family. But you can't expect people to support you unless they believe that the family is a sort of organism which it won't do to operate upon beyond certain limits. If you operate on it too much the nation will lose the power of renewing itself—even if the boys and girls don't lose the taste for amusing themselves all at once. It's the same with individuals, you know; after some kinds of illnesses and operations they don't exactly acquire ascetic tendencies, but they are sterile for all that. But now, you see, there are heaps of young people who are convinced that the family is only an unnecessary nuisance, and that folk have put up far too long with all the worries and humiliations to which some of them are bound to submit if the family is to be maintained as the basis of society. And it's the same with the chances of employment, even if you should succeed in bringing about a state of things in which every one can find something to do. When one *is* out of work one thinks, many think at any rate, that one would rather take anything at all than loaf about. I thought so myself, in my time. But if once there is work enough you'll see that there are some jobs that everybody

wants and some that nobody cares to take. I don't say anything to that either. There are lots of jobs I should be unwilling to take if I thought I could get something else —or saw what other people had a chance of doing."

"Ah, there we have it! Just the mentality we're fighting! That one job is thought to be more genteel or more vulgar than another and so on. No, the people must take the view of work—naturally with reasonable regard to the individual's capabilities—that all occupations are equally meritorious and honourable, since no one will work for himself longer, but all for the whole——"

"What sort of a whole?"

"Why, the nation. The country and the people, the race——"

"So we're back where we were before. The people and the race, that means in sober language all the strangers. There's no reason to suppose they're either better or worse than those of my acquaintance; all I can say for certain is that I shall never see them. It was different in old days; then we were known to those in the burial mounds or in heaven, even if we had not yet made their acquaintance—and we should come to know those yet unborn, when we had passed over to another form of existence. That's what I mean, Asmund. It's impossible to rally a people round anything nowadays. For they are nowhere agreed on the most important point. Here on earth we can't help ranging ourselves in different camps according to our beliefs. If this life is everything and when we come to die you and I will be as though we had never existed, then we don't take up the same position as we should if we believed that dying means crossing the line and being brought to judgment."

Nathalie had let her knitting sink on to the table. She

watched her husband with surprise and something of alarm, but at the same time she felt a kind of relief. Was it something of *that* sort that was going on in Sigurd? Was he involved in a kind of religious crisis? At any rate that was not so dangerous as—well, as many other things she had feared——

Asmund looked at his brother—almost contemptuously, Nathalie thought.

"Oho! Is that how it's got you? You've begun to be afraid of—judgment, as you call it? In other words you're one of the awakened?"

"I don't quite know if you can call it that. But I won't deny that I should be devilish glad to know the truth about it all. Whether all the things one has done finally mean nothing more to oneself—their consequences only concern other people. Or whether it's like this, that just as you think you're going to slip out of all the mess, you wake up and discover that only now are you going to be forced to understand the real meaning of all that you've done."

"At any rate that's a miserable foundation for morality, Sigurd. So according to you the only thing that matters is whether one is to be rewarded or punished after death?"

"Call it that, if you care to. I put it that what matters is whether I'm really extinguished when I go out, as grandmother called it, or whether my consciousness is a thing I shall never get rid of."

"Then wouldn't it make some difference," asked Asmund, "when you're on your deathbed, how you have behaved in the life you can look back on?"

"Certainly it makes a difference. At least as much, for instance, as between the Major's last hour when we had

to put an end to him down in the railway-cutting and Sikka's—when father had said it was cruelty to animals to let her live any longer and she'd have to be shot in the autumn, and mother and we children went out of our way to be kind to her. But when they were dead, they were dead, and there was an end of the difference."

"In any case I can reassure you; our standpoint is that of positive Christianity," said Asmund to conclude the discussion.

His brother laughed. "That's good hearing. So you believe that Christianity is positively true. All that your father-in-law taught us when he prepared us for confirmation?"

"No, Sigurd! Every man must be allowed to keep his faith to himself. All we say is that the Norwegian people is a deeply religious people, and so we have regard for the nation's religious feelings. You can take your oath that even among the Communists—I say nothing of the Labour Party—there are many who are not so devoid of religious beliefs as they would like to appear. When they're in a tight place——"

"But then we may well ask whether that faith is nothing but a remnant of superstition which we've inherited from old times. Or whether there exists a power that draws us in the same way as, let us say, the force of gravity——?"

"Well, upon my word, I can't answer that," said Asmund, giving it up.

"No, I believe you! And most people would have to say the same. But don't you see that it can't possibly be any use trying to arrange men's existence if one doesn't know more about what that existence *is*? A mistake must be just as damnably awkward, whether we propose to

base our society on a superstition, or to construct it in flat contradiction to a law of nature——"

"Well, I can't help that! At any rate we can't let everything drift while we sit here discussing religious problems and such-like. I for my part have had enough, and more than enough even, of the samples you've been serving up this evening. So now I'm going to bed!"

"All right. It's getting late too. But what you said about not letting everything drift while we discuss religious problems—can't you understand that drifting just describes what we're doing, however much we flatter ourselves that we're pulling at the oars, if we haven't a notion of the course we're on?"

"Oh no, boy, shut up now! Talk to a priest, won't you, about these cogitations of yours, and about your conscience, if that's what it is—— Nathalie looks ready to fall off her chair, she's so tired."

Nathalie went out into the yard with her brother-in-law. There was a cold drip under the firs, but big pale patches of clear sky appeared above the driving shreds of cloud.

"Matches, have you——? The lamp's on the chest of drawers. I think you'll find everything you want, but I can wait till you've gone up, in case there's anything——"

The sea had gone down a good deal, she could hear, and the clouds were not moving so fast. The roar of the forest had almost died away, but what wind there was felt icy. Perhaps they had had the last of the summer nights for this year.

A light appeared in the window of the outhouse, and a moment later her brother-in-law came out at the top of the stairs with something white in his hand.

"Oh, I'm sorry! Has she forgotten to fill your jug? Give me the water-bottle too and I'll fill them——"

Asmund was going to follow her into the kitchen. "No, wait, I'll bring it out——" She dashed in for the bucket and a baler—listened: not a sound of Sigurd. But she carried out the bucket and filled Asmund's jug and bottle on the step.

"You must get Sigurd to have it out with you, Thali. The man's going all to pieces the way he's carrying on."

She could not bring herself to answer. Sigurd and I can straighten things out for ourselves. There's no need for others to interfere in our affairs—but she felt, as sorrow and anger clutched at her throat, that it was no longer so. They were not two who were one, they were isolated, and God only knew who there might be that knew more of Sigurd than she did——

"You see, he's getting to be quite an oddity." Asmund was standing in the red light that came through the kitchen blind; it made him look so warm and burly, as though he would close in on her with his confidence—she felt she hated him. "You're a sensible person, you know, as I've said to Sigurd——"

"I hope I am. But now you must go, Asmund." Habits of politeness prevailed in her. "If we're ever to get to bed to-night," she added.

She stood and watched him as he crossed the yard and climbed the little outside staircase to the upper floor of the outhouse. She dreaded—hoped that Sigurd would not be in the living-room. But she was sick with disgust at the thought that then they would be in for one of those vain tormenting explanations that were no explanations, up in the bedroom. Oh, but he is an ass, she thought. For he doesn't *mean* to torture me——

At that moment he came behind her at the kitchen door. "Are you there——?"

"Norma had forgotten to leave any water for Asmund." She took up the bucket and went in; he toddled behind her, so ridiculously, she thought.

"You were a long time——"

Nathalie took a towel and dried herself—she had spilt water on her skirt and apron. "Perhaps you were hoping that Asmund would save you the trouble and tell me what you can't bring yourself to say to me?" She was shocked the moment she had spoken—it sounded so detestable.

"Hoping——?" said Sigurd in utter astonishment.

"Yes, or afraid perhaps."

He made no answer.

"Presumably he will do so too, if you don't forestall him. Evidently it's not the will that's lacking." Again she was shocked at herself—but heavens, how am I treating him! "That is, he seems to think it's his duty. Unless you want to tell me yourself."

"Want to? I've wanted to many times, Thali. I don't know how many times I've thought, to-day, when I come home, I'll tell her. But then when it came to the point——" He shrugged his shoulders.

"But my dear Sigurd"—and now she could hear that her voice sounded tender, with something of a smile in it; this too came of its own accord, outside her will. "Is it something so terrible, that you find it so hard to tell me?" And as she was given no answer she went into the living-room and began to collect the glasses. But when there came a long drawn creaking sound from the empty basket chairs she started so that the whole tray jingled. Sigurd came in at that moment, and now she could not help speaking in the same taunting voice as before—but

her heart was thumping and some veins in her throat were throbbing painfully.

"Is it anything to do with a lady, Sigurd?"

"Well, I was beginning to think you'd guessed it," he said in a very low voice.

Instinctively Nathalie put down the tray as noiselessly as she could. She rolled up her knitting, put it away with the paper of instructions in the table drawer—without making a sound. But he said no more.

"Sigurd!" Quite broken down by the prolonged anxiety, she begged him pitiably: "Sigurd! Is it true that you are in *love* with the other——?"

He stood with his hands on the mantelpiece looking into the heap of ashes where the draught kept life in the last embers. Now he turned round and looked at her, but she could not read the meaning of his expression.

"Answer me, won't you! Then it is true—you are in love with her?"

He bowed his head. "I am that too," he said in the same low tone.

She made a gesture and was aware of the jingling of the brooch she wore. "But—but for God's sake, Sigurd——" Nathalie broke off abruptly; what was the use of saying anything——!

But he had guessed what was in her thoughts. "That's what has always made it so impossible—to talk about it, I mean. You mustn't suppose I didn't realize all the time what a miserable creature I've been—— If I'd only been able to patch up something like an excuse, or explanation which would make it all less damnably shabby, I dare say I'd have managed to speak out before—— But every time I came home and you were just the same to me as if the other affair had never been—which was only natural

of course, as you didn't know anything about it. But at home everything was as it had always been. And so somehow I didn't seem able to realize clearly that the other affair was also real. I had the other one too—it was really I who had been with her. Yes, I know very well that isn't any excuse. I'm not saying it for that. But you mustn't think I've been playing the hypocrite with you all these months, or that it was calculation on my part, to prevent your discovering my infidelity, when I loved you and was with you the same as usual."

Nathalie shook her head in bewilderment. "One can't be in love with two people at the same time—like *that*. In the same way——"

"But one can," said Sigurd curtly. "That's my experience. Not in the same way though. The other, that was—— Well, it sounds ridiculous, love's dream, and I should have taken it for nothing but an empty phrase, if I hadn't experienced it. But that was what it was, just as if one were dreaming. All kinds of fancies and things that have flashed across one's mind making one wish they would come back in the daytime, but then one thrusts them aside, having neither time nor inclination to think of what after all can't have any place in one's life—you know how these things turn up in one's dreams at night, and then they seem to make a real world where everything fits in naturally and rationally as long as it lasts. It was like that when I was with her. Then it seemed true that my whole life was settled for good and all—ran on rails, and I couldn't jump off without crashing. You understand, it was only a sort of flight of fancy to begin with. I saw all the other alternatives at the same time, and pretended to myself that I was still free to choose what I would do with my life——"

"——And then you would have spent it with her? Adinda Gaarder—for I assume it was she?"

Sigurd nodded. "Anne Randine is her name by the way. But naturally I didn't think of anything like that in the beginning. It was only her future that we talked of. Now I can see that I must have had some kind of—purpose, unknown to myself. In the early days we were always talking about her coming home with me one evening, so that she might meet you. But something always intervened. I am sure that you and she would have taken to one another——"

Nathalie gasped for breath.

"Yes. And then what happened later would have been out of the question. Of course she knew I was married, but she thought things were not at all as they were. If she had come home to us she would have seen that—that there was no sort of misunderstanding between us. She would have realized that we were living happily together. And then it would never have occurred to her—she's not like that. She would merely have looked upon me as—well, as a man who was much older than herself, married and done for, with a pleasant wife and all that——"

Nathalie looked up at him. For an instant he looked her in the eyes—it flashed across her, good heavens, is he *so* unhappy! Then he flinched and turned red. "There's another thing—I guessed that she hadn't thought of how much older I was. I didn't care that she should discover it."

"So you let her get the impression that there was—a sort of misunderstanding—between you and your wife——?"

He made no answer.

"I see." Nathalie sat smoothing out her apron. "But that you—— ! We all know that erring husbands are apt to play many tricks which—which are pretty mean, but when it's other people's husbands we think it can't be otherwise. All the same, I can't understand, Sigurd, that *you* could—— Go backwards and forwards between another woman and me. And when you were with me you behaved as if everything was on the old footing between us. And with her—as if you had finished with me perhaps——?"

He shook his head slightly "We never talked about that—hardly ever at any rate. As for saying anything that might give her that impression, I don't believe I ever did so. Well, I can't remember exactly. But it seems to me we only talked about her position. You must remember how young she is. It was always about her. But all the same I guessed that she thought—— She knew you were self-supporting and a great woman of business and so on. She formed her own ideas about it naturally—as a countrywoman. And about our taking our holidays separately. You see, I only made her acquaintance last autumn in the mountains, and then I was alone all the time."

"Last autumn, at Kallbækken——? Doesn't she come from your part then?"

"No, she's the daughter of Halvor Gaarder of Veum, where I lodged. She was sæter girl, dairymaid that is, at Veum sæter. Well, I have seen her before, but then she was only a little girl. Gaarder's father was a cousin of Grandmother Tangen—he came from Romedal. So it came about that I promised to help her a little when she came to town. It wasn't so easy for her to get something to do—she had given some private lessons to children

at home, and the idea was that she should study philology, but then she had lost her taste for it——

"She's rather odd, I must tell you, a very peculiar little person really. It was just as if she was frightened of anything that hadn't life and warmth in it—and nature and growth. She couldn't stick it in an office, and she didn't feel at home in town; she was sorry she had matriculated, because it prevented her asking her father to give her another sort of training. In the country, you see, it means a pretty big sacrifice for parents to send their children to the university."

"Then were you to help her to take up something she had more taste for?" It irritated her that he should bring in this about country people and their ways—in this connexion.

"Anyhow we talked a good deal about what she should do. She is very fond of the farm, and she's an only child. But as times are one must think twice about advising a young girl to take up farming. And as I say, she shrank from telling her father that she was thinking of doing something for which her examination would be useless. She thought of breeding animals for fur, or of starting a kennel. I had got her into a flower shop as a pupil—she said she preferred that to an office job or giving lessons. But then she came up to me one day at the office, very down in the mouth—she said there was no sense in her paying a hundred crowns a month just to be sent round delivering accounts."

Nathalie listened, coldly expectant. Is he really so—devoid of all comprehension that he proposes to tell me the whole of this ridiculous love story of his to-night?

"Now Mrs. Atlee had been to see me the same day—there was something about the installation that she abso-

lutely insisted on my coming to look at it myself. So I went. By the way, she doesn't live at Eiken now, she had to get rid of the place some years ago. She now has a little farm higher up the river, a good way from the station. The son's in business with an uncle in America, and Mrs. Atlee and her daughter were to go across and stay with him till the autumn, and she had to get hold of someone to look after her kennel in the meantime. So I suggested Adinda; as she's used to country ways, she seemed just the right person. I was invited out there a couple of times before Mrs. Atlee left, and the last time she made me promise I would look up Adinda now and again while they were away. Well, you see, I'd said she was a sort of cousin of mine, it was too complicated to explain the actual relationship——"

Nathalie looked away. "And so you have—this has been going on—ever since last autumn you've been leading one life here—and another life—somewhere else, with another——?"

"I have, yes."

He came forward towards the lamp and sat down in the basket chair farthest from the fire. His face looked strangely worn and furrowed—perhaps it was partly due to the light, it was a grey morning outside. All at once she seemed to see how he looked in reality—he was no longer young, it was only she herself who had failed to notice that he was getting older. But this young girl—how could she——? Was he younger when he was with her—was that what it meant when he said the other affair was like a dream?

She longed so miserably to be able to cry, simply to lie down and cry, beg him to go away so that she could have peace with her sorrow. It was like an earthquake, or an

accident—the first shock, before one knows how badly one is injured. But through some force of habit or whatever it was she could not help controlling herself.

"And now?" she asked chillingly. "Is it over now, or is it still going on?"

"She left town in the spring. Just before your father died it was."

"And since then you haven't met her?"

He shook his head. She saw that he was shrinking from something he had to say. "But now she is going to have a child."

"Are you mad?" whispered Nathalie.

She felt tremors within her running under the skin—it's not true, say it's not true, she thought, but could not get out a word; there was nothing she dared say——

"So now I don't know at all," he said in a low voice. "What's going to be done about the future, I mean."

"I didn't think they went in for that sort of thing any more——"

He sprang up. "No, don't, Thali! Do be human at any rate! Say what you like about *me*, trample on me if you like, you have a right to. But there are *some* things you must stop at——"

She collapsed, let her head drop into her arms over the table and burst into tears. "Oh, but Sigurd, Sigurd, Sigurd——" It helped her nevertheless that he could flare up at last—it was no longer so horrible as when he sat cowed and shrunken as though half the life had gone out of him.

She heard that he got up and stood near the table, but she had no strength to look up. She must make haste and cry while she could, otherwise it was impossible to go on.

"Well, I know it's wrong of me not to have said anything before. But there was this too—you know, we've never met with any experiences in all the years we've known one another. So I had no idea how you would take it when something unforeseen happened."

She looked up. "Have *we* had no experiences, do you say?"

"Oh yes, but that's so long ago, Thali. When we first met, I mean, and everything was a new experience—then the merest trifles were great events simply because you were there and I had discovered you. But afterwards—nothing else happened. After a while one day was so much like another. And the nights too," he added softly.

She sat in silence. Her black cap had been almost pushed off while she wept. She took it off and laid it on the bench—it cut her suddenly to the heart to find herself sitting here dressed up; it was as though she had tried to disturb something that had died long ago.

"That time—it was you yourself who began talking about it the other day—the time when you went to smash and Komperud disappeared and left you to get out of it all by yourself—don't you think that was an experience we shared, Sigurd?" That wasn't what she wanted to say; it sounded like a subterfuge, she could hear that herself.

"That too is a long time ago," he said gloomily. "And besides——"

"Besides? What were you going to say?"

"Oh, nothing. I haven't forgotten that you were a true pal and all that. But all the same we were each fighting for our own hand. And then I was knocked out for a time, and you took me in—you were great and you were game and you were sweet——"

"Do you think it would have been better if I hadn't been able to do this? Do you think it would have made a—firmer bond between us in the future if I hadn't been able to provide for myself while you couldn't?"

"When you put it in that way it sounds like sheer insanity. All the same, Thali—it's a thing I can't explain, but I *know*—it's something to do with my never having felt that it made any great difference our being married. Legitimately, I mean."

"Yes, I understand. And now, Sigurd, what do you think of doing now?"

He made no answer.

"If you marry her and get a wife who is dependent on you, and children—then you will experience that other alternative you dreamt of, as you say. And perhaps after all that is what you have been yearning for?" she said resignedly.

"Perhaps—but I wasn't *thinking* of anything of the sort, you understand. Of course I liked her coming to me to ask advice, and I liked being able to help her and so on. But consciously at any rate I never thought I would seduce her."

"In any case you can understand that *I* shan't raise any difficulties," said Nathalie wearily.

"I'm not at all sure that she *wishes* it." Again that uncertain, dispirited look came over him. "There's this about it, that her parents are Catholics. And she says they wouldn't think it made matters any better if she were to marry me. They wouldn't even consider that she *was* married if I was divorced."

"That sounds rather fantastic," said Nathalie doubtfully.

"Yes, I find it a little difficult to believe. I dare say

when it comes to the point they would rather have her married all the same."

Nathalie passed her hand over her face. "How you could, Sigurd. And in *that* way. I would never have thought it. That *this* should be the end of it between you and me. So—miserable—as this."

"No. And I have never *wished* that it should be the end, Thali. For it's you I'm fond of, that is what seems *real* to me. As to the other thing—at times I can scarcely realize that it's true, all the rest."

"But you say you're fond of her too."

"I am. But it's so different——"

Nathalie stood up and lifted out the hanging lamp. It had been stinking abominably for some time, there was no more oil in it. She extinguished it—outside it was quite light and the patches of sky between the firs were streaked with red clouds.

"Different, yes. And the difference is that now it's one who is to have a child by you.

"I expect I shall always think it's *my* child that you've gone and given to another." She felt herself going white and stiff about the lips as she spoke—she should never have said it! But her bitterness was too terrible.

"——But you see it's not your fault that I haven't had one, you have proof of that now."

He turned red as fire. The guilty expression in his face was more than she could bear to look at: "You *have* thought that, don't deny it."

"Nathalie! I don't believe you know what you're saying any longer," he implored in consternation.

The loud wailing shriek that burst from her frightened her so that she ran past him, out of the room.

Up in the bedroom it was still lighter than below; out-

side the balcony door the sky was swept clean and pale, with fine strips of flushed cloud high up and shreds of grey staggling far below.

With trembling hands she had freed herself of her neckcloth and brooches, was beginning to unbutton the green jacket, when he knocked softly at the door. She stood motionless and looked at him in a dazed way as he came in. He went up to his bed, took a pillow and blanket.

"I'll fix myself up downstairs. It's well on in the morning already—— You'd rather I did——?"

Call him back—but what good would that do now? She stood bent forward, crying, with her hands resting on the rickety little chest of drawers. It was no use now, for even if she brought him to her, the past would still be closed, and what was to come neither of them could tell.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE room was full of sunshine when she woke and it was half-past nine when she looked at her wrist-watch. She heard that the children were out of doors. In a flash she remembered everything. And she had a fearful headache.

The light in the room flickered with reflected glitter from the sea and the moving shadows of clouds, and all the sweet fine-weather sounds came up—of little waves breaking and trickling out again, of murmuring pine-trees and children's voices. A bumble-bee was buzzing as it bumped against some part of the wall. The curtains on the balcony door swelled out into the room, and the bed beside hers was without a blanket, with the sheet turned down, unslept in.

There must be some way of arranging it, she thought, and went no further—that made it seem as if she had some hope or other. Then she remembered that she had dreamt of Mrs. Atlee, and she grew so frightened and upset her headache was far more violent. She did not remember what her dream was, only that Mrs. Atlee's face came back to her to the life. She had ceased to recall her years ago, even when Sigurd brought messages from her—he had done so from time to time, long after they had given up visiting her.

Those rooms of hers with hundreds of fat, shiny silk cushions and Turkish smoking-tables and flowered

cretonne chair-covers and the screen with pockets to stick photographs in. It was so grotesque, there was something laughable in the sad, hopeless, miserable situation, when she was forced to picture to herself Sigurd and the other as lovers in that nest of cushions and deep lounges. Well, poor thing, she no longer lived at Eiken, so she had had to give up the rôle of châtelaine and retire to a small farm and dog-breeding, and so on. But Nathalie had a vision of Mrs. Atlee's face, and it was as though she had always thought the woman looked like a procuress. Though she knew nothing against Mrs. Atlee—that she looked awful with her bright red hair and her complexion shading into mauve meant nothing more than that she painted herself clumsily and that the face she had to work upon was a poor foundation for her art. And even if she had made no secret of being madly in love with Sigurd, perhaps she had meant no harm by it—otherwise she would not have been always inviting them both to come and see her or given him flowers and fruit "for your charming wife." She had not been the least jealous; at that time Sigurd had no eyes for other women, she had felt that in a way that made her certain. And Sigurd quite naïvely regarded Mrs. Atlee as a lady of mature age, with grown-up children—on the frequent occasions when she insisted on his coming out himself to look at the work of installation and found it necessary to discuss every detail with him personally, it was because she was so keenly interested in her new home, and when she was so bent on keeping up their acquaintance it was because she knew so few people here in the old country.

It was unjust of her to feel that she had always hated Mrs. Atlee, the woman herself and her silk cushions with black cats and owls and bats on them, and all the rest. But

she could not help thinking of Sigurd alone there with this strange young girl who—with whom, it appeared, she had been sharing her husband for months without knowing it. Now she saw all Mrs. Atlee's frippery as a frame for this intolerable thing, upon which the portrait of Captain Atlee, painted from a photograph and festooned with *crêpe*, looked down from his easel as a witness. "His wide, humorous mouth," as his widow called it, leered derisively at the pair. But it was—yes, it was grotesque that Sigurd and this young friend of his with whom he shared a longing for the country and the farm and the beasts and plants and vital warmth, should have borrowed the house of this Norwegian-American war widow with the purple face and two horn-spectacled children——

——Oh. Nathalie buried her head deep in the pillow and cried pitiably. Was this what it was to be a deceived wife—so spiteful and paltry she had become, so mean and petty—she was reminded of one of those bright-coloured balloons that children run about with—suddenly it gets a tear and there is nothing left of it but a dark, sticky, unappetizing rag. O Sigurd, O Sigurd, I can't even be a decent person without you——

——Asmund, she remembered—good heavens, could he be here still? Perhaps Sigurd hadn't gone either. They might take the ladies' boat at half-past ten. She sat up and listened, afraid of hearing their voices. Then she discovered that there was a note lying on the chest of drawers. She jumped out of bed—it was a slip he had torn out of a note-book.

"Dear Thali,

I told Norma not to wake you as you weren't well,

and I shall ring up H. & H. and say the same as soon as I get to town. I shall sleep at home to-night but I would like you to ring me up to-morrow if you are in town then. I hope you are not feeling too bad. Much love, your S."

If she hurried she would be able to catch the half-past ten boat. She could not neglect the business, she must get hold of Sigurd and talk to him. No, she'd do nothing of the sort. In angry haste Nathalie threw off her night-dress and slipped on her bathing costume. The lovely mornings here, when the sun shone—two wretched Sundays were all she had got out of them. Now she would see that she had a good bathe and would sun herself on the rocks afterwards. Dear goodness, it didn't seem to have done her much good being a conscientious woman all these years, doing her duty by her work and taking care of her behaviour.

——She was so young that we never talked of anything but her affairs, Sigurd had told her. So that was what he found so irresistible—for a change, well, well.

To think that Sigurd had been annoyed, or whatever one could call it, because sometimes she ran in and out with only her bathing-dress on. Who could tell how often she had given a shock to feelings in him which she had never taken seriously—if she had even known of them? Or had he only begun to lay stress on such things now, when his own conscience was guilty? It dawned on Nathalie that no doubt she would now discover many things about Sigurd that she must have seen all the time—but had not criticized until the cleft between them became evident, and the wider the breach grew, the more critical she would become.

It can *never* be healed between us. Oh, what nonsense —she couldn't possibly know that now. Most likely there were very few married people who had not been obliged once or twice in their lives to pull through a— crisis like this. All the years they had lived together, they must weigh infinitely more than this business which he seemed to have walked into almost absent-mindedly. Their life together then was the reality. He had said so himself.

The child and she, the other who was to have the child—— Oh, but at present this was only a little possibility and it wasn't certain that it would be any more. It was not *just* that she should be driven out of her own life for that alone. It would not be just to Sigurd either; it was sixteen years of his life, their marriage.

It was such a sparkling fine morning when she came out into the veranda that it made it even worse to have such a disaster weighing on her neck. It was high tide and the sea shone dark blue with the gleam of the sunshine broken by the crisping of the water, making it glisten in endless showers of white sparks. Under the rock where the beach came to an end the little watercourse was full and spread itself over the sand in a tiny delightful delta which ran glittering out into the sea.

The children had discovered her and came tearing: "Auntie Thali—oh, do come for a swim with us." Their hair was light as the down on little chickens, and their sunburnt bodies looked warm enough to fondle, against their little skimpy bathing-dresses. Maiken's was light yellow and Torgal's sky blue.

"Oh, but you must be patient a little while yet. First you must let me take a swim outside——"

Oh, the cold, living water closing over her, so good, so

good—— She struck out with closed eyes, straight into the sun. What if she were to go on swimming, as far as she could, and then let herself sink——? Rubbish. That would certainly be a difficult and painful way of making away with oneself, for any one who was a good swimmer. A brutal way too, for the children and Norma—and Sigurd. Just a childish dream of revenge—that after yesterday's scene he should never again see her alive.

She lay on her back floating—she had not been so far out before. After the red darkness of the sunlight through closed eyelids the land had a faded look, with the rocks and the pinewoods and all the villas above and below like little coloured sweetmeats in the morning sun. Stranna lay at a distance from the other houses—an innocent, old-fashioned idyll with the villa stained brown to look like a log hut and little beaked dragons' heads here and there. She could see Braaten from here too, right opposite. The red outhouses and the surrounding fields had been given a fresher colour by the rain.

To keep summer and let one good day slip by after another, that was what this place was for. It was altogether unnatural that a thing like this should have burst in between them just here. She could see two little dots down on the beach, one yellow and one blue, and Norma's pink frock, as she went to the well.

The children dashed out to meet her, sending the water flying all about them and making Nathalie call out "Not too far out now!" She stood within her depth and held her arms under Gary, while the boy made floundering strokes; she supported Maiken under the chin and the little girl puffed out water and screamed: "Look, now I can, Auntie Thali!" But it was not as it had been; her heart was now turning away from the sweet, melancholy

feeling it had given her to handle the two little bodies—they ought to have been ours. What if it turns out that one fine day I shall not be their Auntie Thali any longer—she thought she could see it: in a year or two perhaps she would meet Maiken in the street, the big school-girl would curtsy almost distantly, as though she hardly recognized Uncle Sigurd's former wife. She knew it was possible, but could not picture it to herself as real.

"Now you must come out—no, you can't stay in any longer," she said prudently. "Let me have your things now and I'll rinse them out, then you can put on your other bathing-dresses and stay out in the sun—now, Maiken, didn't you hear what I said?"

She went up to the bedroom. She had nothing to put on but a half-soiled summer frock, the others were at the wash. The peasant dress she carried out and hung up carefully in the passage. The handkerchiefs and brooches she put in the top drawer. Sigurd's toilet things were gone—out here they had had to content themselves with one chest of drawers between them. She took a rapid glance at one of his drawers—there were still a couple of suits of his underclothes in it.

Norma had laid a table for her in the veranda below. Nathalie discovered that she was hungry and thirsty for coffee—and her headache was better after the bath. She tried to say to herself that time would show—and that most marriages had probably gone through some catastrophe or other. She wasn't one of those opinionated girl-wives who understood or chose to understand nothing, simply flew off in violent resentment on hearing that their husband had gone astray after someone else. Now if she had had a husband of the kind that wants to keep his own tame domestic wife at home and at the same

time reserves himself the right to go hunting wherever he has a chance—well, then she would simply have refused to sit at home like a good wife. But this affair of Sigurd and the Gaarder girl was a thing that might happen to the best of men. There would have been no need to take it so terribly seriously—though no doubt Sigurd would have done so all the same, he was like that. If only it had not had consequences——

Norma brought her a deep little dish with poached eggs on top; it looked good. "You said, ma'am, you didn't like cold veal, so I made a little casserole——" Casserole? Oh yes, now she could see, it was one of the heat-proof dishes she had bought at Båstad.

"Thank you, Norma, that's kind of you——" She sat looking at the dish. There had been an old professor and his wife at the boarding-house where they stayed. Their son laughed and said that mother didn't look half so ill as she made out, but father liked to be the one who looked so much better, and he read the paper aloud to her every day. And he was not so shaky on his legs as he let on, but that gave mother the triumph of being his support. There was something so infinitely tender in the way those two decrepit old people nursed and cared for each other's withered bodies. Nathalie had thought, as she watched the old wife's hands spreading the plaid over her husband in his reclining chair, that affection could transform even old age into something good. When our bodies are no longer anything but dry and brittle shells, Sigurd and I will stroke each other so gently and tenderly and will love the immortelles we have become, because of our memory of the time when we were young and full of sap and enjoyed one another's freshness.

Nathalie stealthily drew out her handkerchief and wiped away the tears that were flowing quietly. What if it had been the last time the other night, without her suspecting it—why, then she was like the scapegoat they drove out into the wilderness. Not that she believed it was the last—it was not *so* easy to break off a connexion like theirs. But her heart shrank at this new idea—if what had always been a voluntary act of love should become a thing they did because they yielded to a craving, or from old habit, because it is hard to break it.

Ah well—neither of them could yet know *how* much had been destroyed, but time would certainly take care to show it. No doubt it was more than she was able to imagine now.

Nathalie was tired next morning, after a night of little sleep, so her feeling for Sigurd had swung back towards anger. It humiliated her that she had been merely thinking, lying awake and thinking—over and over again, backwards and forwards, the same bitter, undecided, self-pitying thoughts. She had not shown herself mistress of the situation to any appreciable extent. And she had worn herself out with anxiety for him before all this came out—and it still pained her that he had cut such a miserable figure when at last he was forced to avow the mess he had made of three persons' lives. Well, damn it, no woman *likes* to see her husband humiliated—least of all when it's not undeserved.

Nathalie dressed with great care. She had discovered that half-mourning suited her very well, and it was chiefly for that reason that she wore it, for none of the people they knew in town would remember that she had recently lost her father. The sweetest of her white voile

had always seemed unbearable to see another person crushed under misfortune and shame and terror, it was as though she herself was partly in the other's skin, sharing her disgrace and fear. And that was the year after the boy's death; it was the operations and the orthopædic treatment and so on that Fru Totland had not been able to meet. When they married they had been so sure that Tobben had only to pick and choose among all the positions that were open to him. Torbjörn Totland was good-looking, with an engaging manner, and he had had a good education—rather too comprehensive, as he had been to all sorts of schools abroad where his father's business had taken him, but at any rate he was perfect in French and English. At that time things were still booming, but Torbjörn Totland never got anything to do—other than little jobs which never lasted very long. Nathalie guessed after a while that he didn't get on with people, and as he *was* being kept——

In reality Nathalie had never cared very much for Alfhild Totland—not that she had any particular objection to her, but somehow they had never been on intimate terms, although they had worked together for ten years. However, she had shown herself capable and extremely industrious, and Nathalie had believed her conscientious. So it came as a shock when she discovered the state of affairs.

The result of the long and painful scenes of investigation was that Nathalie procured Fru Totland the necessary loan from the bank to enable her to get straight and at the same time to pay off a mass of scattered debts which were driving her distracted. One item of Nathalie's sanatory process for putting the other on her feet was that she herself should meet the first instalments. And Alfhild

Totland's gratitude had been so impetuous as to make Nathalie quite sick with embarrassment—when this comparative stranger flung herself into her arms and confided to her with sobs and kisses that she had been collecting veronal as the only means of escape——

Well then, Nathalie paid the first four instalments. When the fifth fell due Fru Totland came to her in great distress—Tobben was suffering from nerves and insomnia, he must have a change of air—could Fru Nordgaard find at any rate half the amount for her? Same story next time—Nathalie paid. On the two last occasions Fru Totland had simply said nothing about it, she evidently took it for granted that Nathalie was going to settle the whole loan for her. At present it came to a little over two hundred crowns twice a year.

Anyhow, it was no use talking about it, that would only be painful for both of them. Fru Totland could not manage to pay anything herself—she hadn't a bad salary, but the scale of pay in House and Home was not very grand, and Tobben was an expensive man to keep. One was sorry for Alfhild Totland, her own requirements were probably quite modest, and she was capable. Nathalie was still of the opinion that she could only have acted as she had done, in helping her to screen her irregularities. But of course she could not avoid being anxious—suppose the temptation to manipulate a "loan" should prove too strong for Fru Totland a second time? Nathalie was responsible to the company. And Fru Totland could not fail to see that Nathalie was keeping an eye on her, however imperceptibly she might try to do it. The situation was painful, though both pretended to ignore it.

The fact was that financially speaking she was a

bachelor and a gambler—Fru Totland counted on this, though perhaps unconsciously. Asmund counted on Sigurd in the same way. Others of his friends had done so. And Sigurd was no good economist—that is, he was pedantically economical and orderly in every-day affairs, very unexacting really. He was still the good country lad who never forgot for a moment the sacrifices made by his father in sending him to the university, so that he felt bound to account for every penny he spent on himself. Every little convenience they had added by degrees to their daily habits—a little indulgence on their holiday, a modest stock of drinks at home, the installation of a bathroom—became in his eyes the height of luxury and it was quite touching to see how he enjoyed it. But he was a countryman too in this, that he could not say no when any of his near relations asked for his signature. It had been the same in his home—he had thought it too bad that his mother should be obliged to look at every penny; his father had never been able to understand why his wife should want to have cash in hand, and what he spent on the children's education also bulked hugely in his imagination. It wasn't that he was not fond of them—the loss of his daughter and then of his wife had been blows that he never got over. "If mother had lived he would never have ended as he did," Sigurd said after his death. It was the security he had given that broke Sheriff Nordgaard.

In reality it had been an expensive arrangement for both of them, not being a family, but two independent partners in a common establishment, when she thought of what their joint earnings had been, on what a relatively modest scale they had lived, and how readily they had allowed themselves to be laid under contribution. But

they had been quite comfortable in that way. "Happiness is not to be bought with money," that was God's truth, even if one's livelihood has to be more or less secured before one can be personally convinced of its truth.

She did not even know for certain how much of his yearly income Sigurd at the moment might have left for himself. Would he be at all able, in his present position, to provide for a wife and child? No doubt it all looked very rosy when he pictured himself realizing the other alternative—living as father of a family in the good old style, with a young wife who only had to stay at home and look after his house, and who had to be cared for and petted now and again when circumstances demanded it—and then there would be a cradle with a baby in it around which the whole house revolved, and the rooms would be in a charming state of confusion through the little ones and the young mother. But in reality—would Sigurd be able to face such a rearrangement of his life now?

The ants were crawling over the dead bird. But Nathalie's heart ached. How was it that it had never fallen to her lot to be the young woman in a home in which she was entirely at home? For she too had desired the other alternative. But by her it was not to be attained. Sigurd was free to imagine that it was, in his case.

The evening sky was so glorious as she walked down their own street. All day long great white fine-weather clouds had welled up over the roofs of the town and sailed away into deep-blue space; now they were turning rosy red, as they seemed to be pressed higher up the vault by slate-blue banks of cloud with gleaming copper-coloured rifts in them. There must be thunder coming. If only the storm did not break over Stranna while Norma

was alone in the house with the children; Norma was so terribly afraid of thunder. Then she realized that she could not get back there to-night—she had forgotten that when she told Sigurd on the telephone that she could meet him at the flat.

Surely he wouldn't think it was for that reason she had made the appointment so late—that if she was obliged to sleep at home to-night everything would be patched up without any trouble? Oh, it was unbearable—fear, uncertainty, secret shame wherever she turned, as though she could not move without treading on quaking ground. And again that embittered feeling returned, which only brought humiliation on herself. It was laughable if it had not been so sad—here was Sigurd treating himself to a little lapse into sin, and on that account she had to fall as deep as this——

Norma would be more frightened if she stayed away without saying anything. It must be possible to take the train as far as Ski and get a car there—but anyhow it would be a long way to walk through the forest, dark as the nights were now—and perhaps in a storm——

Sigurd was on the balcony as she looked up. There was a reddish reflection over the roofs and the tree-tops were dark and already had a hint of autumn in their outlines against the threatening stormy sky—such was the impression she had at the moment.

He opened the door to her before she had got out her key; he said good evening in such a hushed voice, with something despondent or sympathetic in his manner, that it seemed to her he was acting a part. "I hope you are not feeling too bad," he had written. A new-born instinct to put the blame on others crept up in her and turned against her husband. If she should be led into

making scenes, crying, losing all self-control, she would never forgive him.

The rooms looked no worse than usual when she came to see them standing empty in summer. Only she was more struck by the dusty uninhabited smell and the gaps left by things that had been packed away.

Nathalie went out to the kitchen. "I must have a cup of tea, I'm tired." Now he was trotting after her again in that irritating submissive manner. On the dresser were some dirty cups and plates. "Oh, I didn't get time to wash up," he said in excuse.

"No, I see that. But you must let Fru Randem do that sort of thing for you when she comes here to water the flowers."

"Does that mean," he asked as she was setting the tea-tray, "that you will be staying on at Stranna for the present and want me to stay here?"

"I must stay with the children till Sonja comes home anyhow." He must really make what arrangements he pleased, she didn't intend to say what he was to do. "I suppose you agree that we can't ask Sonja to cut short her visit up country? In that case we should be obliged to give her some sort of explanation."

"I expect Asmund will see to that," said Sigurd gloomily.

"Well, that's between you and him. At any rate I won't have anything to do with it."

There was a dull and distant roll of thunder as she came out on the balcony with the tea. Her flower-boxes looked rather woeful; they had been watered, but nobody had picked the withered blooms. Mechanically Nathalie began to remove the dried up heads of the geraniums. Sigurd had often taken her hand and sniffed at it after

she had done this—the smell of geraniums was so good, he said; "but you ought to get a myrtle, that smells even better. Mother had one and used to pinch the tops off in the spring, and then we always had to smell her fingers afterwards."

"I saw an adder this morning as I was running down to the boat," Nathalie remarked as she poured out the tea. "Norma is excellent, but she can't be left with the whole responsibility."

Sigurd said nothing.

"While I think of it—what was that name you had for the wryneck in your part of the country?"

"Emmet-hunter," he said in surprise.

"Yes, I know that, but you had another besides——?"

"Cuckoo-tit." He turned red. "It was you who always said one ought not to judge a person of whom one only knows from hearsay. You haven't done so either, before now. Of course you have reason to be prejudiced against one with whom I have been unfaithful to you, but she's not as you think," he said, flaring up.

"No no, Sigurd, you misunderstand. I had no intention of being—impressive. What made me think of it was that I saw a crow they had shot and flung on an ant-hill. Then I remembered your doing the same with a wryneck once. I didn't like your shooting it, as I thought its call was so pretty and summery——" She felt foolish and stopped abruptly—now she remembered his saying that it spoilt the nests of other little birds; when he was a child they had told him that it threw out their eggs because it was in the service of the cuckoo and helped her to replace them by cuckoo's eggs.

Sigurd shook his head: "I can assure you *she* has never done anything with the design of driving you out of your

home. I think I told you that it's by no means certain she will marry me if we get a divorce."

"Oh, she'll do that when it comes to the point. If things are really as you told me."

"There's no doubt about that. We've known it since May."

"Was that the reason," asked Nathalie slowly, "why you were to meet that Doctor Gaarder—that time in the spring when you made a trip into the country and didn't get back till next day——?"

"Yes, I took her home. She was in a badly shattered state and I didn't see how I could leave her alone."

"*Now* I can understand why you didn't want me to come." Nathalie paused. "And what about the others you were with—Gaarder the fishmonger and his wife—and Sverre—did they all know what terms you were on with this young girl?"

He reflected for a moment: "——Oh, now I remember. Asmund wanted us to come out with him, I think, he rang up and so I had to invent an excuse. No, there was nobody with us. Dr. Gaarder is a second cousin of hers. I heard that he was in town and would be here a week. At last she agreed to let him examine her. I met her afterwards and took her back."

Distant flashes now flickered within the darkened canopy of cloud, but they could hear no thunder—the storm must be moving farther away.

"She was in such despair—though really her self-control was extraordinary. But the fact that it was a married man would seem so terrible to her parents. And she could not make up her mind to resort to the obvious means of escape. We were talking of her staying at Apaldhaugen as long as was practicable and then going

away for a time, to Denmark or Sweden. But she wouldn't do that either; she said keeping it secret was destroying both herself and me and there must be an end of it. But if she stayed out there and I was in town, the natural result would be that we should continue as before. But in the morning she told me she had made up her mind, she was going to see Gaarder on the Monday after all, as arranged. I can't deny that I was relieved in spite of all—little as I liked the thing itself."

Nathalie felt a quiver of curiosity. It was horrible—but she *wanted* to hear more about Sigurd's affair with this young Adinda.

"On Tuesday Hans Gaarder rang up and said she had sent an excuse. A girl friend of hers was to come out to Apaldhaugen and take over her work for a week or so, while she was laid up, but she had been delayed. I went out there later in the week, but only met the friend. She told me she had taken over the place for good and Anne had gone home that afternoon."

Anne. Nathalie's heart gave a jump. It sounded familiar. That had been his mother's name, and his only sister's.

"Then I didn't know what to believe. I dared not telephone to Veum, they notice everything at these little places. But then I had a few words from her—on a picture post card that she had enclosed in an envelope. Well, I understood it to mean that it had passed off of itself, and that being so she thought we must now be sensible and let this be the end of it."

"And you felt this as a relief?"

"Yes, I did."

"So you were not more fond of her than that?"

"Oh, Thali, it isn't so simple as you seem to think. Of

course I knew in a way the whole time that I was in love with her. I always looked forward to meeting her, but I pretended at any rate to myself that I didn't care to go beyond what I had—I liked to look at her and to hear her talk. One could see in her that when she was older she would acquire that calm and graceful manner that you often find in the women of good country families. But her extreme youth was so apparent at every moment that one saw it would be a long time before she reached this calm confidence. Oh yes, I was so fond of her that I don't understand myself how I could live on both sides of the watershed as it were—both with you and with her. But all the same I never thought—well, you know the kind of thoughts that are always suggesting themselves, quite aimlessly anyhow. But I thought, the man who marries her will get one who is worth having, she's one to make a farmer's wife. I didn't reckon at that time that it would end in my sleeping with her."

Nathalie trembled again. It hurt her so sharply. But at the same time there was something else in it—like walking in the teeth of a hailstorm.

"When you got her settled at the little farm you never thought—that circumstances were favourable for a further development of the friendship between you?"

"I expect I did. But not consciously. You see, the first few times I visited her Mrs. Atlee and her daughter were still there. Just after they had left I had to go out there on business. And then I missed the last train."

"On purpose?" It leapt out of her mouth, unpremeditated.

"At any rate I didn't keep a very sharp eye on the time," he admitted.

"And it didn't occur to you that you could take a car?"

"Oh yes, it did. But we kept putting off telephoning. And then somehow it came about that I saw she was afraid. But I had a feeling that she was still more afraid I should let her go—I don't suppose she knew it herself, but—— *Then*, as I drove home, I had firmly made up my mind to tell you how things were. It never occurred to me that I could avoid doing so. I had no idea that when I came home it was like entering the door of another world. In the beginning I really thought every time I had been out there that now there must be an end of this—that I must wake myself up, I mean, for it was quite unnatural and unreal to live two lives at once as I was doing. But it seemed as if she thought it perfectly natural. She never said a word about the future, or about what I did when I was not with her, or what I had imagined this would lead to. Only when I guessed how things were with her did I get her to tell me what her ideas were. And then she said she had had no ideas—she had always known I was married and that it couldn't last, and it would make no difference in her eyes if I got a divorce; on the contrary, it would only make things worse."

"Then does she share her parents' views on that point?"

"I'm sure she does. I never noticed that religion and that sort of thing counted for very much with her at first, beyond her having to go to church every Sunday while she lived in town. I was inclined to think she only did so because she was obliged to, but that in reality she was pretty sick of the whole business and disposed to look at it critically. The lady with whom she lodged at first took great care that she fulfilled her religious obligations as she called it, and Anne couldn't bear her—she called her a holy water frog." She smiled faintly. "She was

of half-engaged to one of this woman's sons; he's in Germany, studying to be a vet. Well, I dare say he's all right, but nothing had been settled between them; it was his mother who insisted on treating her as if the matter was all arranged and assumed all the rights of a mother-in-law. And the Gaarders too were in favour of it. That was what put her back up, she said afterwards—but she had never thought of leaving the Church. And when it took the turn it did between us, she left off thinking, she says; but she had never imagined it would last long."

"That was an exceedingly modern young lady, it seems to me."

"Oh, I should rather call it as old as the hills."

"That a young girl should take up with a man when she knows all the time it can only be a temporary connexion——? No, Sigurd. I don't believe even the so-called modern girls—not many of them at any rate, whatever airs they may give themselves—I'm sure most of them hope in their inmost hearts, if they care for the man at all, that it will turn out to be a lifelong affair contrary to the programme——"

It was now almost dark; now again there was a gleam of summer lightning far away.

"I mean that people embark upon a thing even though they know it may end in a situation from which there is no way out. That must have happened ever since the world has existed, I think. If they really—well, really love."

It was a good thing it was dark. The last thing he said —she did not know why, but it seemed to destroy every hope. Though she did not admit to herself that she had had any hope.

"But then, Sigurd——" She had to stop; she could not

speak without a tremor in her voice, so great was her fear now. "Then what is going to happen—where is she now?"

"At home at Veum, as far as I know. It will soon be a long time since I heard from her."

"But then it's—then she *is* going to have this child?"

"The last thing she wrote was that she would let me know if she required any help for getting away somewhere, but I was not to try to see her when she passed through Oslo. She thought she would have to leave at the beginning of August, if they were not to notice anything at home."

Nathalie could hear her heart throbbing as she sat. She wanted to find out what Sigurd had in his mind—it was like tearing the scar from a wound, but what did he feel at the thought of this child which a strange young girl was bearing for him? For it must be so far advanced that she could feel the life in it. Nathalie was shattered by pain and impotence. Was Sigurd thinking of this—that his child was stirring in this Anne whom he had loved, who loved him——?

"Anne Nordgaard." She caught herself saying it aloud. She saw that he started in the darkness. "Just the same as your mother and your sister. They were both dead before we met."

"Yes. But what do you mean by that?"

Nathalie got up. "It's getting too cold to sit here." She went in and switched on the ceiling light.

"Shall I shut the balcony door?" he asked as he followed her.

"Thanks, I don't think it's necessary." The room with the divan in the corner, the chest of drawers, Werenskiold's lithographs of horses—she began to understand

how Sigurd could drop back into his everyday life ever time he found himself in these familiar surroundings.

"But what are you going to *do* now, Sigurd? You can let everything go on drifting, man! You will have t take the initiative yourself for once."

"Does that mean," he asked slowly, "that you *call* upo me to—take myself off?"

"Must you take it like that! Though for that matter, i you only *would* take things one way or another—*Anything* is better than seeing you standing about doin nothing and just letting things slide."

He looked at her sharply, in surprise. Nathalie took seat on the divan, with her elbows on her knees and he head in her hands. "Well, well, Sigurd. But can't yo understand that I feel I've lost my bearings? All thes years I've always taken it for granted that if you said thing it was true."

"And I believe it was so. Until now I never had reason for saying anything else."

"And then it appears that in the last—three-quarters o a year, I suppose it was—you've succeeded in fooling me in a way that—well, you've done it quite like an old hand."

"I've been surprised at that myself. I wouldn't have thought it was so easy to deceive one's spouse."

Spouse! The formal word affected her like a finishing stroke. She got up, put on her jacket, but paused with her hat in her hand.

"But you can understand, can't you, Sigurd, that this is a thing one can't get over? I'm not saying that to reproach you—what would be the good of that? But the foundation of it all doesn't exist any longer. The basis of our relations, I mean. When we both had re-

signed on *that* head—when we didn't have any children, I mean—well, then it could not be said that we were a family, we were only two good friends. But that we were, so good that"—oh, now she was going to cry!—"that it was worth staying together our whole lives in spite of it. If we were fond of each other and could give one another such a—complete—and—and intense happiness—and we knew we could rely on one another—then it was worth while. Even if perhaps both you and I felt a certain loneliness within us, since we were—without fruit of our bodies, as they said in old days."

He bowed his head, at once assenting and reflecting, it seemed to her. He looked so harassed, both by sorrow and by humiliation, and by dwelling on something that was beyond his power, that it hurt her more than she could bear. No, she could not bear to be so sorry for her husband, one's husband is a part of oneself, at least he was that to her——

"All that is changed now. If it had been nothing more than your having an affair with another woman—you may be sure I should have been deeply offended, but I have sense enough to know that such things happen. But what you tell me—that all these years you have been playing with ideas of a life which was quite different—or many different lives which you might have lived——"

"Everybody does that, Thali," he interrupted her hotly. "Or most people at any rate," he added more gently. "Only as a rule nothing comes of it but—aimless speculations."

"But in your case what has come of it is a child. And she who bears that child was to you a kind of dream, but you have had the misfortune to dream very realistically."

He gave a start as though she had struck at him. And

suddenly she heard so plainly within her a voice that seemed to mimic her mother's—is it not better that two in any case may be granted happiness rather than that three people be forced into unhappiness? The old text of mamma's preaching—she wanted to laugh and be wildly hysterical, so grotesque was it all. Poor Sigurd, however things might turn out, would he perhaps be the only happy one——?

She pulled herself together, spoke more calmly: "In any case, Sigurd—*you* have made your choice. Home and child and all the rest—they are not unattainable by you, you know that now. And besides, you must surely feel that you ought to give your child a home, and she who is its mother ought properly to have been Anne Nordgaard now."

"But that's not possible," he said wearily.

"No, I dare say not—not without having recourse to steps with neither of us would find palatable. But in any case I shall not make it more difficult for you, whatever you may decide on. I—I wish you nothing but well, you know that."

He said nothing, and she paused, bitterly disappointed. She did not know what she had expected him to do. Then she went over to the mirror and put on her hat with care.

"Are you going——?"

"Yes, I must see about getting away now."

"But—you can't get out to Stranna to-night?"

"Oh, I'll manage somehow."

"Wouldn't it be better to sleep here? I shan't interfere with you," he said curtly.

It revolted her quite unreasonably, his saying that.

"I can drive out with Sverre," she replied carelessly.

"He has to go to Dröbak anyhow. Otherwise, you know, I could have gone to Aunt Nanna's and slept there. But as Sverre offered to go round by Nesodden, you see—— And Norma doesn't feel comfortable alone in the house with the children at night."

He looked at her but said nothing, and she could not quite make out his expression. "Well, good night, Sigurd. Try anyhow—don't be so hopeless. Good heavens, other people have come out of a business like this and been none the worse. It will be the same with us somehow or other, you'll see."

"Is he coming to pick you up here——?"

"No, I'm to meet him in town. At the Eastern Station at twelve. So it's time I went. Good night, Sigurd."

"Well, well, good night then."

He had not touched her—it struck her as she went downstairs—it was just as though they had both been afraid to come in contact. And it occurred to her that he had scarcely spoken her name while they were talking. And usually he said Thali, Thali, Thali after every other word almost. But she seemed to have said Sigurd, Sigurd, Sigurd incessantly, as though trying to call to him.

The paving-stones gleamed wet in the lamplight as she came out, and the maple-leaves that hung autumnally in the yellow glare of the street-lamps shone with moisture. It was drizzling gently, she had to take a taxi at the corner.

Before she got there she had made up her mind; she gave the driver the address of the hotel at which her father and mother used to stay when they were in Oslo. On arriving there she explained to the night porter that she had been delayed in town and had forgotten her latch-key, so that she could not get into her own flat.

They both laughed at this, and he led her along the corridor to a room which he told her Herr Söegaard had always found so comfortable; it was so quiet, looking on to the yard——

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE hammering at the door woke her confusedly, and when she collected herself and saw where she was, her memory returned as a feeling of sickness.

She discovered that she could not remember clearly what she and Sigurd had said to each other the evening before. But he must undoubtedly have understood her as actually ordering him to get a divorce and marry Adinda Gaarder. That was not in the least what she had meant to say when she went to see him yesterday—she remembered having thought that anyhow this need not be the end of everything. That habit of self-control that she had acquired, and the fact that she was suffering so acutely, must have been responsible for her going too far.

Perhaps it was the right course, when all was said and done—since there was a child on the way. And the girl was so much younger than Sigurd——

The trouble must have come about almost as soon as their relations took that turn. This was the thought that caused her more misery than anything else—that he had not been able to have a child by her. It gave her a purely physical feeling of being put to shame and rejected. It was all very well to bring forward all the values that a man and a woman may give one another in a love affair, offspring excepted. There must always be a voice in one's inmost being which says: but nature has only one intention. And now Sigurd had discovered this for himself.

It might well be that if he married the other his experience would be mainly disappointing; he would see more clearly than while it lasted what their marriage had been worth. That could not alter the fact that nature had rejected her and used little Anne as soon as there was an opportunity of doing so.

Nathalie washed herself again and again with a towel and pressed it against her eyes. Phew, how loathsome having to dress without one's proper toilet things. And just in those few steps before reaching the taxi she had got enough rain on her to make her clothes look untidy. If there was a thing she hated it was voile dresses that were not quite fresh. Stockings she would have to buy on her way to the office and change them there——

Fru Totland came in with a pile of commission accounts, and as Nathalie looked through them and signed the attached cheques she thought that Fru Totland ought really to speak in time so that she could arrange about her leave of absence. Fru Andersen had been away three months before and two months after the birth of her boy, but she had herself provided a substitute for a great part of the time, her sister-in-law. When her little girl came she left for good and got the sister-in-law permanently engaged. It was easy enough for her, Andersen was an exemplary husband and he made enough for them to live on, both being capable people. Fru Totland certainly could not afford to pay a substitute and could only stay away as long as her leave lasted. But it would be a good thing to have the matter settled at the next board meeting.

And now she did not know what to do about her own holiday either. They had intended to go away together this year. Sigurd had taken Veltgjeltbua, which the

people of Rafstad had owned in his father's time. Last year it had been let to townsfolk, as Sigurd still called them when he talked about his home. It was a cruel and uncanny thought that if he had gone away a little earlier last year none of this would have happened.

She wondered whether she should speak to Sverre about the situation. Though she could not imagine what had put this idea into her head. All the same there were several things about which she ought to confer with him—the delay in delivering the carpets for Solstrand would be greater than she had notified. This made no difference in reality; the main building would not be ready for occupation this year. But anyhow there were various things which she ought to discuss with him——

But when she rang him up Fröken Dahl answered that the architect was not at the office to-day, probably he would not be there before Monday, as he had injured his leg last Sunday while bathing. She was just going up to see him, if there was any message she could take, or would Fru Nordgaard telephone to him herself?

Soon after Sverre Reistad rang her. "Can't you come up here? You must have some lunch anyhow? Then would you mind bringing the patterns with you—but if that's too much of a bore Fröken Dahl can call for them to-morrow for instance——"

Nathalie worked away at her velvet jacket to get rid of the traces of rain. Sverre had always been a man who noticed what women wore; even before Henriette's time he was like that.

There was something that reminded one of Denmark in the little street of villas. The whitewashed brick houses with steep red roofs were neither big nor little, and the windows and verandas were so placed in the plain façades

that the whole house seemed to be saying in a firm but friendly way: We are modest, but home-like and practical. Most of the front gardens were abundantly provided with rose pergolas, and fruit-trees and flowering creepers were trained against the houses. Sverre had an apricot-tree and a wistaria; the tree had borne fruit once or twice and the wistaria flowered almost yearly.

It was a friend of Sverre's who had built these villas—ten years ago or thereabouts; they had already acquired a patina of the past, or of an outworn fashion. But Sverre had admired them so hugely when they were built. He had then just returned from a stay of some years in Copenhagen and was enthusiastic about the way the Danes built—a straightforward, serviceable, urbane style. He knew how to put his ideas into writing and had had a number of articles in the papers on the subject. Among other things he had written about Nyeboder and about Norwegians in the naval dockyard; he had been lucky enough to dig up an ancestor of mamma's, Commodore Cæsar Timoleon Brodersen, and quoted juicy bits from the man's diaries—they were hardly suitable for publication in extenso in the daily press. Mamma had been so drolly scandalized—Nathalie could not help laughing at the thought. She went through the garden and entered by the veranda.

Sverre was half-lying in a long chair and raised his head and shoulders in greeting. "You'll excuse me?" One of his feet was resting on a cushioned stool, wrapped in a thick white sock. "It was nice of you to come, Nathalie."

No, he hadn't felt anything till he came out of the water, then he found it hurt damnably when he put his foot to the ground, he explained in answer to her inquiry

as to how it had happened. Well, of course he needn't have gone bathing in a place he didn't know, with such a sea running. Yes, it was broken all right. He was going to have a sort of stirrup round his foot and would be allowed to walk by the end of the week—that's how they treat it now. "Sigurd says they did the same with Ahlmann last year when he broke his foot, and it was quite a success."

Turning half away from him Nathalie searched in her case which she had put down on the table by the window. "Sigurd—have you been talking to *him* since this happened?"

"Yesterday. I'm afraid you'll have to find a chair for yourself."

"About business, I suppose?" she asked, and then she was afraid he might notice from her voice that there was something wrong.

"We were to have gone together to that home for the aged." He was fingering the patterns she handed him. "That's fine, but do you think the purple will stand the sun?"

"No, I know it fades fearfully." She laughed, and he laughed too.

"Now the thing is, I've had an entirely new suggestion from that lady who does interiors; I'll show you her designs when we've had lunch, for the music saloon as they call it, and the room beyond. I like them, but it'll be a question whether you can change the order for carpets. One of the new ideas is that she wants after all to have carpets made of that cow-hair yarn you showed us, from a factory at Ringebu I think it was. In natural colours. Copper-red plush for the furniture."

"Plush, do you say?"

"Yes, it's coming in again. It's indestructible, you know, and perfectly sun-proof, and no more difficult to keep clean than anything else—with vacuum cleaners of course. Smoothly stretched over large surfaces it gives an entirely different effect from the old stuffed furniture with buttons and tassels."

"Yes, of course." Nathalie nodded as attentively as she could.

"But as I was saying, we'll look at her proposals when we've had something to eat. But tell me, how are you getting on at Stranna? Don't you find it rather wearing after a bit?"

"Getting up in the morning's rather a business, I confess."

She scarcely followed what she was saying. After all the rest this was almost too much for her—and she could not conceive what had made her say anything so idiotic as that Sverre was to drive her home. And then that as luck would have it Sigurd should have been talking to him just before. It was no longer ago than last week that Sigurd asked her about him, as she had to see him now and then about Solstrand—they ought to get him to come out one evening, Sigurd said, he hadn't seen him for ever so long——

Oh hang! it didn't matter *now*. At this everything within her seemed to rise up in protest—now more than ever it *did* matter that she had stood there and said a thing that Sigurd knew to be a downright lie. It made her perfectly mad to think of it. Never had she felt such a jealous concern for the impression she wished Sigurd to retain of her absolute truthfulness.

She gazed forlornly at the big aquarium which was built up against the wall facing her—till the flashes of

silver and gold in the greenish darkness of the water as the fish whisked round among the aquatic plants seemed like shocks and twinges of her own nerves. Some big goldfish of a paler colour with a waving veil of fins hung close to the glass wall gaping with their red mouths; their wriggling motion suddenly filled her with disgust.

"Well, of course it's a nuisance having to be economical with water. But I knew before we went there that there's always that snag in a place like that."

His domestic help, all in white with a white cap, came and said lunch was ready. Sverre picked up his stick and hoisted himself on to his sound leg. "Will you take my arm?" she offered, and he laughed as he hobbled into the dining-room between the stick and her.

He looked well, now that he was no longer very young. For that matter she had never thought him so ugly—or ugly in a pleasant and amusing way, she used to say when her schoolfellows talked about his big nose, which was pretty red even then and so oddly thin and bony—a great triangle in the middle of his skinny lop-sided face. His thick black eyebrows formed a slanting line; they almost joined over the root of the nose, but the right one sloped down a little and the left turned up. Almost everybody in the class could draw caricatures of Sverre Reistad which were easily recognizable. His figure even then was slim and dapper, but he was always dressed in clothes that he had outgrown in every direction; Fru Wille was hard put to it to keep her own children fitted out, and she let her nephew go about looking like a gipsy.

Sverre boasted of the time when his grandfather *had* been a gipsy—had actually grown up on the road, till his father was stabbed in a fight and his mother found another companion. Pastor Feltborg took charge of the

boy. It was in order to marry Christiane Feltborg that he had passed one examination after another—it was intended that he should go into the Church. But then it was discovered that this Gipsy Jens had a real genius for languages, and so he ended as Professor Jens Joachim Reistad, the orientalist—called thereto by the howls of his race.

Later on Sverre admitted that his grandfather had only been a gifted cottar lad, adopted and taught by Pastor Feltborg. The gipsy was farther back in the family tree, but he was there. From him they had their black hair and eyes, which by the way were not black, but more like dark grey or dark green. Nathalie looked down at him, when she had piloted him to his seat. "There's never been any brown in your eyes—I wonder if there's any truth in your having gipsy blood in you?"

He burst out laughing. "What in the world made you think of that now?"

"Oh—I'm thinking whether I should take a really quiet, calm holiday. Take a room at Gusslund if they will have me. Simply vegetate—read and bathe and sit in the garden and do a little needlework."

"Oh yes. Though to tell you the truth, Nathalie, I believe you'd find it too primitive. These places one knew as a child seem very fine when one looks back. Besides, they're getting senile, I went to see them one day last summer. It's a long way to a decent bathing place too."

"I should have to borrow a bicycle. I'm longing for another holiday by the sea." As she said it she saw in her mind's eye the old meadow on which Veltgjeltbua stood, overgrown with osiers and dwarf birch; in the wall of the ruinous byre there were often stoats. The three little

tarns in a row so blue against the autumnal red of the moor which spread away to the grey knolls and the scree under Nonsvola—it was like a lost paradise in her memory. Nathalie was dismayed to feel that her eyes were filled with tears.

"I'd be more inclined to suggest your going to Solstrand," said Sverre. "Won't you have some more brisling—it's good, isn't it? There are only eight rooms for visitors in the annex, and I dare say it'll be empty at that time. But the Pedersens who farm the land can look after you, Fru Pedersen's a first-rate cook."

"It would be the same as at Gusslund—mamma and Ragna would expect me to look them up at least every other day. That's why I can't quite make up my mind for Gusslund after all. Ragna's expecting a baby in September, as I dare say you know, and then of course everything will be centred round that. And I can't deny I'm getting a bit tired of always having to act the ideal aunt to other people's youngsters."

She was strangely relieved at having admitted it aloud to another. It had been swelling like an ulcer within her the last few days, but she had refused to see what it was. Yes, of course, she was fond of the children, Ragna's and Nikolai's and Sonja's and Hildur's and all the other children who expected—as did their parents—that she should remember them on all occasions with expensive and ingeniously thought-out presents and devise amusements for them and listen with interest to all that their mothers had to say about them. Children of women with whom she came in contact in her business or in some other way—there was no end to all the youngsters for whom she had to be a little bit of an aunt. She had done it so willingly; it was impossible altogether to avoid the

sense of something lacking, whenever the time came round for remembering one of these children—but it had made her happy to be able to bring happiness to them. Now, all at once, it was as though she could do it no more. It made her angry to think that now she would have to attend to Fru Totland's affairs, and later on she would hear of nothing but the baby. "Lilly-you're-naughty," Fru Andersen's little girl had answered one day when they asked her what her name was. It came quite spontaneously, from pure roguishness, but the child had had such a success with it that now they had to get her to say it every time her mother brought the children to the office, and then they had to send for cakes and bananas and show their admiration of Lilly. Now she felt she hadn't the heart to go through this comedy again——

Sverre sat as though expecting her to go on, but as she said no more he started another subject. "That gipsy nonsense you reminded me of—I used to believe in it myself. Father was proud of it, and so I was too. Perhaps it's a reaction against it that has made me so commonplace in my old age. With such nice ornamental hobbies—cactus, aquarium, etcetera." Nathalie's only reply was a rather forced smile.

The maid cleared the table. "Thanks, you can leave the coffee. If it's not troubling you too much—it's the third file from the top on the left—if you'll bring it here I'll show you——"

Nathalie did her best to be interested. It made things no better that he noticed her preoccupation, though she tried to conceal it.

"You ought at any rate to come out and see it some time. I don't suppose it's every day that you get such big

orders? You haven't seen the decorations your mother has in her new house either.

"——There's nothing I can do for you, is there, Nathalie?" he asked after a pause. "You seem to be out of humour over something——?"

"I'm afraid you can't, Sverre."

"No, I suppose not." He was silent for a moment. "It's only this—since you started the talk about Gusslund and my gipsy blood and the memories of childhood. I suppose I may say that next to your nearest relations I am perhaps your oldest friend?"

"Ugh yes, that's what's so idiotic. I stayed at an hotel in town last night, you see, but I didn't care to let Sigurd know that the children were alone with the maid out at Stranna—it looked like thunder too. So I said I was to meet you in town, you were going to Dröbak I said, so you had promised to drive me as far as Braaten. Of course I had no idea that Sigurd had just been talking to you."

"No, you couldn't very well know that, if he said nothing."

"No, there was something we had to talk about, so we didn't happen to speak of anything else. But now I'm naturally annoyed that I should have come out with such a corker."

Sverre looked at her thoughtfully.

"Of course you think it was very unfriendly and unsympathetic of him not to mention your accident——"

"Not a bit. It was more odd——" He checked himself. But now it struck her, *how* odd it was that Sigurd had said nothing.

"——More odd that he didn't tell me to my face, you're a liar. Is that what you mean?"

"One need not put it so plainly, Nathalie. But if you'll allow me to say one thing—these comrade-marriages with freedom of movement on both sides and full confidence and independent work and interests and acquaintances are certainly excellent. I'm sure they lead to far fewer lies than the good old-fashioned marriages—it isn't worth while. If only one doesn't take it altogether too seriously if now and again circumstances should involve—well, you understand, the telling one another a few fibs."

Nathalie crushed the butt of her cigarette in the ash-tray and looked at him expectantly, but now he was evidently determined not to meet her eye.

"Is it anything special you have in mind?" she asked.

"M'yes. You know I understand—or imagine I understand—that one may chance to say a thing quite unreflectingly. And if one says it to a person like your sister-in-law for instance, it may lead to a great deal that one had never dreamt of."

"Do you mean Sonja? Now I haven't any idea what you're alluding to."

"No no, it doesn't matter anyhow."

"No, won't you explain what it is? Have *I* said something to Sonja that she's been embroidering?"

Sverre Reistad looked uncomfortable. "I can't possibly know what you said to her. Probably it was quite out of proportion to what she's saying."

"I should prefer to be told what it is, obviously. Otherwise one is bound to think it's worse than it is."

"It wasn't anything very bad either. It was something about a girl I was supposed to have seen a good deal of last winter. We were as good as engaged, according to Sonja."

"Fröken Gaarder?" asked Nathalie timidly.

"Yes."

"Then do you know her?"

"Hardly at all. I was introduced to her once. Asked after her parents and so on. They had a farm in Berdal when father was medical officer there, so I remember Gaarder, but she can't have been even born then—well, born she must have been, it was some seventeen or eighteen years ago. But I don't know *her* in the least, you understand."

"Sigurd knows her." Nathalie held her breath an instant. "You know that, I expect?"

"Yes, I know that. It was he who introduced us. I met them at the Western Station, in the waiting-room one afternoon."

Nathalie sat biting her lips.

"It positively looks as if I was the very last of Sigurd's acquaintance to be told of his friendship for this young lady."

Sverre shrugged his shoulders.

"That was what I meant. Presumably you have never had cause to conceal anything from each other. You must remember that. Probably all your private experiences were of such small account. Then if it happens that one or other of you gets mixed up in something which is not altogether trivial, and doesn't exactly want to say anything about it, there's no need to take it so terribly seriously, Nathalie."

"How in the world can you know," she said hotly, "whether I need take it seriously or not?"

"No no, I beg your pardon. But hasn't it ever occurred to you that in the course of years Sigurd has grown a good deal younger than the rest of us?"

"Do you mean that I have aged more rapidly than he?"

"I mean that when you got to know him and brought him into our set we were more or less contemporaries, he and you and I and Gerda and all the old gang. But isn't it rather arbitrary of us humans to measure our lifetime by the time it takes the earth to go round the sun? It may be handy for many of our calculations, but from a purely physiological point of view a year of our childhood or youth is quite out of proportion to a year of old age, it is a far greater and more solid slice of our lives. And in the same way different people do not live their lives in the same tempo either. Now Sigurd is one of those who take plenty of time growing up. Hasn't it occurred to you"—he smiled slightly—"that he is now pondering over—problems, we may call them, which the rest of us have given up thinking about long ago because we don't believe it's any use expecting to find an answer to them?"

"Do you mean by that," asked Nathalie in a combative tone, "that you consider Sigurd naïve, or undeveloped, or what is it you wish to insinuate?" She was angry on behalf of the man she was accustomed to shelter with her arms, but at the same time profoundly disquieted because she felt obscurely—had not she herself thought something like this——?

"No, not at all. All I mean is, Sigurd seems destined to be a *really* old man. If he had stayed at home in the country"—Sverre gave a little laugh—"Can't you imagine that he might easily live to be a hundred? With mental faculties unimpaired—a wise and worthy old man, of whom the local paper will tell you, every time he enters on a new decade, that he reads it daily with in-

terest and spectacles, that he still chops wood and does odd jobs of work about the place?"

"Do you imagine that it's already gone so far between him and me that I'm amused when any one makes fun of my husband?" She was quivering with wrath, but her fear was even stronger. Whether she wished it or not, she was being parted from Sigurd as surely as though she were standing on a rock with the sea surrounding her on every side.

"I'm not making, fun, Nathalie. Quite the contrary. It's very likely that there's an essential reason for the time being so out of joint. Technical progress and all that has resulted in putting the control of things into the hands of people who live too fast and wither before they are ripe. Drop from the tree of life like shrivelled unripe apples. There is no longer a tension between the young who expect a lot of life and the old who know a lot about life. Instead of that we've got a young youth which expects something and a senile youth which tries to imagine that it too is still in the expectant stage."

Nathalie looked at the clock and began to put her things back into the case: "I shall have to get back to the office——

"——There's something disgustingly true all the same in what you say about the shrivelled unripe apples which only drop off." She made a gesture as though sweeping something off the table. "I don't know why it is—that we are all drawn into the same kind of working life—and there we find that experience is almost a handicap. What we learned when we were young and receptive becomes antiquated time after time as technical development advances with giants' strides, as the papers say. Seniority counts no more with most of us than it

does with automobiles and typewriters. And unless one has one's roots deep down in the race—— I'm sure you're right in saying I've grown older than Sigurd in the last few years."

"It's a thing that runs in some families," said Sverre evasively. "The tempo, fast or slow, in which one lives. In Sigurd's family they generally live to a great age."

"My father-in-law did not live to be an old man. And Sigurd's mother was in the forties when she died."

"She died of consumption brought on by carelessness in nursing her daughter. And Sheriff Nordgaard was drowned—I suppose it's no secret that he took his own life. But Sigurd had a whole heap of grandparents and ancient relatives alive when you were married."

"Hff, yes." Nathalie put her hat straight before the glass. "At any rate I'm glad it's not in our line to be so fearfully old. I certainly have no desire to be a Methuselah. Well, good-bye and thanks, I'll ring up and hear how your foot's getting on——"

Outside clouds were gathering everywhere above the tree-tops—they were still light, almost as blue as the sky, with sunny edges and shimmering red haze. They might turn to anything—a return of summer heat, or thunder in the late afternoon. Luckily last night's storm had passed east of the Bundefjord, the papers said—houses struck at Kraakstad and Enebak.

Sigurd's father, yes, he had simply given up life when it became too complicated for him. A new and terrible dread began to stir within her—he had taken all this with such a strangely passive unhappiness; poor Sigurd could not be very well fitted either to come through a tangled situation unscathed. But God in heaven, was there a chance of his doing as his father——?

She rang him up as soon as she was back at the office. She had to hear his voice—if any one knew every tone of it, it was she! Would he have her old burberry sent down to the boat? She explained at length where he could find it and a cardboard box—listened intently for his answer, but his voice sounded calm enough. He would see to it.

He was on the pier with the box in his hand when she came down to the boat. His manner was naturally rather silent, but calm—a good deal more natural than she succeeded in being during the few minutes they stood talking before the gangway was withdrawn. And he stood and waved his hand as the boat left the pier. It was provoking, it was idiotic, that she should feel it to be a fateful, a symbolic parting, as the streak of dirty water with bobbing bits of rubbish and reflections of the steamboat's smoke grew wider between them.

CHAPTER NINE

THERE came a time when Nathalie did not know whether she was bought or sold—that was the expression she used when her thoughts circled round and round the same thing.

Divorce. She shuddered; it was humiliating and ridiculous that, bitter as was her grief at their being forced apart in this way, she dreaded the time when she would be obliged to discuss the matter with her family and friends and acquaintances—mamma, Ragna, Hildur, Sonja and Asmund and God knows how many more who would not let her off. It seemed to her that surely Sigurd and she were about as anonymous and unimportant in the world's eyes as two people could be. They filled a place, it was true, but there were ten people ready to take that place if they were gone. They had relations and friends who cared for them, but all of these had others for whom they cared more. They had never had any serious significance in life, except what they signified to one another. And if that was now at an end there was nothing to be done but accept the situation as far as possible without fuss. But of course there would be talk. They would have to run the gauntlet, she did not know how far. There was no malicious intention in it. The general good will and sympathy which decent people feel for their fellow-creatures is always spurred into greater animation when anything happens which

gives the decent people a peep into their neighbours' sexual relations. She had not been free from it herself.

Sigurd was already in their power. Now and again she regretted not having tried to coax a little more out of Sverre Reistad—she would have liked to find out how much he knew. And then she had a most consuming desire to ask him if *he* thought Adinda Gaarder was so pretty. If she had set to work to pump him she would nearly have died of shame afterwards, and regret. But at the same time she regretted not having done *something*.

And Sigurd, Sigurd—— There was nothing more to be got out of him, unless she herself were to cross-question him. She talked to him on the telephone, she had dined with him in town two or three times. He appeared to take it for granted that things might remain as they were for the present—he living in the flat and she out at Stranna. She told him she had been to see Sverre—he made no remark. "Surely you must have thought it odd, my saying he was going to drive me back." He made no reply. "My lying to you like that, for you knew it was a lie—didn't you think that was strange?" "Yes, but——" "But——?" "You know I've now found out for myself how easily one says such things." She gave up, bitterly disappointed.

She went up to the flat one evening; there were several things she had to fetch. The stuffiness of it——! It had been a warm day. Nathalie went round opening windows.

Sigurd's room had not been put straight. Clothes which he had changed lay all over the place. Nathalie collected everything which was to be sent to the wash, wrote a list and pinned it to the bundle. The grey suit

she hung in the wardrobe—feeling the pockets, but there was nothing in them. Had she found a letter, would she have yielded to the temptation? she wondered. It was tempting to search the rooms for anything which might give her a hint—what was his real position now? She put it from her. It's bad enough as it is, it will certainly be worse; I need not make myself worse before the time comes——

He had not remembered to change the sheets of his bed since she did so last. She took off the soiled sheets, fetched clean ones and laid them ready for Fru Randem when she came. Trifles like clearing up after him and keeping his things in order—these she had undertaken with secret pleasure; to her they had been the privileges of a wife—the practical fellowship between them was reduced to so little when they each had their work and a domestic help to run their small ménage. Sigurd had protested at first, and no doubt he had meant it. But he had long been accustomed to her picking up his worn socks from the floor and sending his things to the wash. If he got this new little wife of his and she thought she had enough to do with the house and the children and couldn't look after him like another baby, and then if Sigurd had regrets and thought, ah, Thali was a great deal more attentive—oh, it was comic, and it was sad, that she could feel it would be a slight revenge if he missed her only in this way——

There was plenty of hot water; she might as well take a bath while she was here. The room was full of white steam, so she could not see as she poured pine-needle extract into the bath—she took rather too much. Sigurd always used such a lot. Afterwards, when the bedclothes got warm around him, he smelt of the forest. She had

clean clothes here to change into—another dress too. Rust-red washing silk from last summer—she had not worn it this year, as she was in mourning.

She still wandered about the rooms after she was dressed. She had had no supper, but there was no hurry this evening—Norma had her sister to see her, and she had left word that perhaps she would sleep in town tonight. Perhaps she and Sigurd might go out to supper together then perhaps he would tell her what he thought of doing. Nathalie went about finding little jobs to do.

Her heart beat violently as she heard a key in the door, but it was not Sigurd's step in the hall. It was only Fru Randem. Nathalie spoke to her about the work.

Fru Randem was rather sour when she discovered that Fru Nordgaard had used all the hot water. She had intended to give all the floors a good scrubbing this evening, as Herr Nordgaard had gone away.

Gone away—so he had gone away?

Fru Randem wished to ask if Fru Nordgaard had made any arrangement about a domestic help when they returned to town. If not, she had a niece who was very capable—and she could sleep at home——

"Thank you, but I don't yet know what I shall be doing this autumn. But I'll let you know in case——"

She left directly after. It was too late for the boat—it was too early to go to the hotel and to bed. She would have to go and drink tea somewhere and read the papers. Hildur had come home, she knew, but she was not in a mood for her society. Yes, now she knew why she had been so disinclined to meet Hildur all these months. was like the animals; before there is anything to be seen they feel when the ground is about to give way under them——

Oh, she wanted to scream, to cry. She had gone home this evening with her mind half made up—no, fully made up, only she wouldn't acknowledge it to herself. She would take Sigurd back, she had scarcely doubted that she could still do this. He was *her* husband—the other one, that was only an interlude and he himself no longer knew what to think of it. The other one knew she was entangling herself with a married man; it was perfectly fair if she tried to get back her husband.

Then he had gone away. She did not even know where he had gone. Whether he had gone on the firm's business. Or whether he was away on his own affairs.

She went to her old hotel. At least she had toilet things this evening; she had taken a little handbag with her.

She woke in semi-darkness in the strange room, and realized that she had been dreaming, but her return to consciousness was like getting out of a hole into which she had tumbled—she felt ruffled, angry and embarrassed as after a silly fall.

She had dreamt that she was lying with Sverre—it was on a kind of broad sofa made up for sleeping, in a room which she did not see clearly, the only impression she had was that it was ugly and untidy, with dirty clothes piled on the furniture. Some children were in the room; one of them was Minda as she looked before she took to glasses. In her hand she had a bird-cage with a canary in it; she was looking with disapproval at the two who lay there.

Well after all—one dreams of oneself in an improper or painful situation, that may happen to anybody. Most married people have certainly had dreams of infidelity

even now and then—why worry about it! One thinks no more of it and in a few days the memory is effaced like a cinema picture in the sunshine. And they are certainly not due to one's having any desires in that direction, on the contrary. It is as though a malicious goblin were at work, amusing himself by cheating one into compromising oneself. Though the improper situation never becomes more than a situation. She at any rate never dreamt more than a visual impression—feeling, hearing, smell, taste she never experienced in dreams. How often for instance had she dreamt she was arranging a dish of fruit, but she had never had a taste of these dream-fruits. Even when she remembered something that had been said to her in a dream, she had not heard it; it had been communicated to her as it were in some other way. The slightest sound in a dream wakes one with a start. For all dreaming is but a kind of impotent play of the fancy.

If the memory of this dream continued to oppress her with a persistent dejection and uneasiness, preventing her from falling asleep again, it was due to her having gone home yesterday in secret expectation. As one manœuvres, chasing and enticing by turns, to get back an animal that has run away, so the evening should have ended in her enfolding Sigurd in her arms again——

Give him up—she could not! It gave her a stab in the heart, making her feel as though she sank with the whole bed under her. It seemed as though she had not clearly realized the meaning of it. She was going to be entirely alone. A couple of rooms in a new apartment house and nobody living with her. She would go out to her meals, or cook something for herself at home; if she did not want to dine alone she would have to get hold of somebody to keep her company, as one says of visitors for

whom one feels a sort of lukewarm good-will. She who had always been cheerful, if only the one with whom she lived was at home. Was she to lie alone every night of her life in a cold widow's bed—wake up feeling cheap and foolish after dreams which something impotent and clumsy within her had patched together from chance thoughts and fancies, the things her waking ego took no notice of—the weeds of the mind which only the morbid cherish and collect? Her life with Sigurd, his companionship, had been a happiness so manifold, a satisfaction which filled her whole being. Was the loss of him to shrink up into the loss of a man in her bed, her sorrow to dwindle to a torment of the body, like the pain of a whitlow?

In that case life would be unbearable. But every day people were divorced; they had to bear it, and she had never felt the least surprised at their bearing it, when she heard of others.

Mamma would say, But Thali has her work——! She always said that if a divorced wife had a situation, no matter of what kind; so long as she drew money for what she was doing, mamma said, she could get along; she had her work to live for. If she had nothing to do outside her home, mamma sighed—now one can see what a bad thing it is when a woman has not built up an independent existence; she said that to children about their mothers. Mamma and her fellow-worshippers talked as if "Love's Comedy" were the most amusing thing in all literature, they chuckled over the copyist Styver, the type that is now extinct. It did not occur to them that when it was a question of woman's work one would think they would make all women into female Styvers.

through a tunnel of foliage along the little river. And then they came to the creek. Around the old houses were nets hung out to dry, and among them the new summer cottages were bright in their Noah's ark colours. The road ran below the fields of Holme farm, swung round—and there was Sverre's new hotel, on the wide stretch of level ground towards the sea, just where one had a glimpse of it between the islands. It was a fine situation.

He helped her out of the car, looked at her in almost touching expectation, and laughed: "Well, now you see what it looks like——"

The sea had grown darker and the sky was misty, overspread with reddish even clouds. The touch of cold wind that swept over the whole scene—that was familiar enough, an autumn evening at home, a little after sunset. The bath hotel—a long two-storied building with no roof visible and a band of big windows running along the facade—there was nothing remarkable about that. The colour of it reminded one of pale cheese, in this light at any rate. The annexe lay a little lower down among the bare rocks; there were lights in the windows there. When the door was opened one entered a lighted hall with the feeling of being welcomed into the warmth.

A practical design and solid work, that was characteristic of Sverre's building, but there was never anything original or noteworthy about it, she thought with a touch of compassion, as she said: "Yes, I must say—it looks attractive!"

"We'll go all over it to-morrow!" He looked pleased. "This is Fru Nordgaard, Fru Pedersen. Fru Pedersen is in charge here while there are so few visitors."

The radio was in a room beyond the hall; Fru Peder-

sen preceded Nathalie up the stairs. The reddish brown stair-carpet went well with the stained panelling and the scarlet banisters. Old pictures of sailing ships on the walls—goodness knows where they had got hold of so many of them—they were getting rare now.

The first thing she saw on entering her room was the fire in the little grate. "Oh, what a charming room, Fru Pedersen!" Fru Pedersen explained proudly that there were four rooms with fire-places in this house—they were really double rooms, but at this season when there were so few visitors they were to be treated as single ones, the architect said. There was the wardrobe, there the washing recess, and if there was anything Fru Nordgaard wanted she had only to ring. There was a low sofa in front of the fire-place and a low, broad bed with some dark cushions on the top of the dark purple coverlet.

The gong made a noise out of all proportion; it was evidently intended to summon the visitors from the beach and the wood and the islets. She was reminded of other summer boarding-houses—and of awful, badly brought-up children of the visitors who fought for the privileges of banging the gong. In those days she had not cared so very much what quarters she had, there was always her home to go back to. Now she was enrolled in the great army of lonely ladies, no longer very young, who have to live all the year round on the impressions of their summer holiday, as that woman had said whom Nathalie met in Valdres a year or two ago.

Sverre stood waiting for her in the hall. "We're having supper in the hearth-room." This was the only public room in the annexe.

The other visitors were an elderly gentleman with a pointed grey beard and old-fashioned gold spectacles—

the author Bernhard Berg; a lad with permanently-waved hair—Edmund Jandel was his name and he was good-looking in a way—not a very attractive way; he looked as if he might have rehearsed his facial expressions before a glass. Aasen, a shopkeeper, and his wife were middle-aged people, short and chubby and strikingly like one another; both had childish red and white complexions and clear, bright eyes.

Conversation at the table was chiefly addressed to the architect, Reistad, and frankly he cut a rather comic figure, as he sat with a gratified look receiving their somewhat naïve compliments on the hotel he had built. When these kind people heard it was her firm that had supplied a large part of the textile furnishings they were at once prepared to express their enthusiasm for them too. Nathalie tried to keep up her spirits—she was here for the bathing and an open-air life, and she had been given a charming room. But she wished she had not come here. And the fried halibut was raw inside, and the potatoes were boiled to a mush.

It was quite dark outside, Sverre protested, when Nathalie proposed to take a walk after supper. "But dear me, you needn't come too—I don't suppose anybody will carry me off"—but she was determined to get some fresh air, and there was no question of Sverre's allowing her to go alone.

A steady, ice-cold wind met them, together with the monotonous roar from the beach—huh, it was familiar enough in a way, a dark autumn evening by the fjord. In the leafy tunnel along the Holme river there was a smell of fungus and withered leaves—no temptation to walk far.

The radio was in full blast in the hearth-room when

they came back. "I was thinking—I've got some really good Tokay. Can't we have it in your room? Oh yes, Nathalie, a little drink will do you good before going to bed!"

"I'm afraid you're sorry you came down here?" he asked—she was staring into the scanty fire, had barely sipped the wine and made no attempt to keep the conversation alive.

"I must say I've always hated staying in a boarding-house." Nathalie shuddered. "And now I think I've been pretty stupid to go on doing so time after time. Instead of joining him in the mountains or something of that sort. It must have been the ancient superstition about the envy of the gods—that one can insure one's happiness by renouncing part of it voluntarily."

"You're thinking of nothing but that all the time——?" he asked in a low voice.

"Well, is there anything strange in that——!"

"No, I suppose it's natural. But are you sure——"

"Sure of what?"

"I don't know whether you'll allow me to say what I was thinking of."

"Really, that depends on what it is."

"I know you have been convinced all the time that you were just as fond of your husband as you were in the beginning. But are you sure that it was so?" Nathalie was on the point of flaring up, but he checked her. "Some people are faithful, Nathalie, because faithfulness is what they are in love with. You are shocked and—and—well, downright miserable, I see that of course, because Sigurd has not been as faithful to you as you have been to all that you had in common. But if you're to be honest—I don't say you have any reason to be specially

honest with me, and if you tell me to shut up I'll do so instantly—but if you're to be entirely honest, isn't it true that you and he knew less and less of one another as time went on?"

"That I was getting to know less and less of Sigurd latterly is of course obvious. It doesn't require any special honesty to admit that."

"And probably he has wished to know less and less about you."

"Oh—if you mean that mawkish 'understanding' that married folk put the blame on when they think themselves misunderstood—— What do you suppose that has to do with love?"

"It has something to do with it all the same, Nathalie. Not with two people falling in love with one another. But if it happens that they fall in love in such a way that it's like coming into a vast fortune of happiness, then it will be difficult to administer that fortune unless by degrees they get to know each other pretty well."

Nathalie gave a bitter laugh: "You're preaching. Hanged if you don't talk as if you edited the woman's page in some Saturday paper."

Sverre Reistad laughed too: "Do you know, I did that once, Nathalie? In your father's paper by the same token, for two months—while your mother was on a lecture tour. Yes—it was the winter of that year that you came home from the mountains with Sigurd Nordgaard, and you were so much in love with one another that I've never seen anything like it. If I say it myself, I believe I took my medicine nicely. Well, no need to thank me, I could see well enough that I was knocked out all ends up. But then as I say I wrote reflections on love for the back page of your father's respected paper five Saturdays

running, and God knows, anyhow I imagined it did me good——

"——And all the same I believe I thought even then—I had a kind of feeling that you and he wouldn't get on so well in the long run."

"But *that* you took care to keep to yourself! You accepted him in our set and behaved as if you liked him quite well. You and he seemed to be friends all the time——"

"Certainly I liked him. Kept to myself—what was there for me to keep to myself? I'm not sure that I didn't think quite as much of Sigurd as any of you, not even excluding yourself. Quite realistically, you understand—for what he is, with his good sides and his limitations——

"——But of course I can see too that it is more difficult to take a realistic view of a person to whom one is married. Two people may differ so fundamentally in their beliefs and assumptions that the acknowledgment of their differences may involve too violent a strain. May force one to revise one's habitual line of thought."

"God help me, are *you* going to start talking about contrary assumptions! Do you know, I've heard so much of that nonsense that it makes me sick."

"Yes, but that doesn't make it any less true. You must remember that most of us as we grow up construct for ourselves a kind of erotic pattern. Before the time of physical experiences sets in we have usually thought out how we would behave in it. Formerly people called this having one's ideals. And the ideals, or the pattern, or the scheme, whatever you like to call it, is presumably older in the service of propagation than the actual mating." He laughed quietly. "The fishes, you know—there are comparatively few species of them that have hit upon

ending their sport in mating. They play and sport, some of them make spawning-holes like the salmon and the trout; it's a scheme that's born in them and that they're driven to realize. And no doubt that is the primary factor everywhere—one seeks to realize one's erotic pattern, to sing the notes and build the nest according to the instincts of one's species. In reality it is probably the most important factor for humans too—more important than one's choice of an individual of the opposite sex to conclude the sport with."

"Oh, what rubbish you talk! At any rate there are so many generations between us and the fishes—if it's true as papa asserted that we're descended from them. It was scientifically proved, he used to say. He and mamma always said it was scientifically proved when they told us fairy tales, just as old countryfolk begin with 'once upon a time'——"

"Well, as far as I know our descent from the fishes is not so scientifically proved that there can't be any truth in it."

"But anyhow that doesn't concern me." Nathalie finished her glass. "In spite of all, neither Sigurd nor I have ever been a fish." She felt that this evening the little drop of wine was going to her head; she got excited and felt inclined to rattle on unguardedly. "So you have imagined that Sigurd and I would not be able to hit it off in the long run? You can hardly have done that—it's easy to say it after the event, but there was no reason for thinking anything of the sort. That a man can make a fool of himself is a misfortune that may happen; it need not mean that the person to whom he is married is not the one who suits him in the long run, which is what life is. The desperate thing about this case is that the girl is in

such a position that he cannot withdraw. That is a fact to which I have bowed. But it is accidental, you understand, accidental!" She swallowed hard.

"Accidental, yes. That he should happen to fall in with a girl like that. Be invited to look after her and help her and act guardian and providence and the rest of it. That being so it was pretty well bound to go as it did. Because of the erotic scheme he had made up for himself as a boy—at first he can't have had any idea that it was erotic: when he grew up he would be so good, so good to his mother. He talked to me once or twice about his mother—I remember it made an impression on me because I can hardly remember my mother, I was only about six when she died. 'My mother was like the earth,' Sigurd said to me; 'all drew strength from her and lived their lives out of hers, she was hidden away as the earth is by all that grows out of it.' When she died his pattern must have been this: if I ever take a wife, I'll see that she doesn't have to wear herself out and never be given thanks or honour, only asked to do things and never consulted. I shall treat my wife as I feel they ought to have treated mother."

Nathalie made a violent gesture and upset her wine-glass. She felt she was a trifle unsteady on her feet as she went to get a towel to wipe up. Sverre leaned forward and stirred the fire.

"So then it chanced that you two came together. And your pattern was comradeship and self-help. To be one who contributed, instead of receiving——"

"That was nothing like my pattern as you call it! God knows I've never had any such principles as being a self-supporting wife and all that sort of thing. We simply wanted to get married, as quickly as possible, but then

I was obliged to keep my job provisionally. Otherwise you know that all that preaching about economic independence and comradeship in love—I at any rate, and Gerda too, we were more inclined to oppose the whole thing. Ragna was the only one who chimed in with it all and then went and married a good old-fashioned breadwinner. No—if I had any erotic pattern at all it was the negative one—never anything like the household at home!"

"You mean, you wanted a husband you could live with without scenes and rows and fuss. Silence is golden, isn't it, and speech is silver, and your home was a regular Mint in that way. I guessed even then it was for that reason Sigurd got you body and soul—well, of course he was so damned good-looking too in those days, but the rest of us felt that the great charm about him was his quiet manner. We were all of us more or less uncertain—we gave ourselves airs and posed and puffed ourselves out for fear of putting our foot in it. He was entirely free from self-assertion—seemed content to be as nature made him, in all modesty and composure. At any rate that was what made me see I could never compete with him—he had no dreams of being different from what he was, and I, God help me, didn't know what I was or what I wanted to be, only that I must anyhow make myself different, disguise myself——

"But even if you reacted against their nature and the way they behaved—never able to give themselves time to be silent or think anything out before getting up to shout about it—you know, after all they determined your view of many things. 'The Søegaards' we used to say and that covered you all. Think how different you were from Aunt Kaja and the Willes—at heart you des-

pised my cousins deeply with all their petty caution and calculation—and aunt who was always preaching that one ought to behave sensibly and be on a good footing with people of influence etcetera——"

"Poor things, your cousins haven't got much out of it. But what about you, Sverre, did you have one of these erotic schemes too? When you raved about me in our salad days, was that because you had composed a piece which you wanted to have performed in real life and you fancied I was suited for the leading part?"

"No, it was just the other way round—the piece was written about you. Or Gerda. At first I was equally in love with you both. More with Nathalie one day, more with Gerda another day. But always with the Söegaard girls. Together with your remarkable and talented parents and your emancipated and brilliantly unconventional home at Sumarlide. Yes, you don't know how grand it looked in my eyes—there was the home of intellectual life, freedom and the Norse spirit and God knows what else—well, now you're laughing!" He laughed too. "And then as you grew up—you went in for drawing and weaving, you took up the concertina and sailors' songs and Gerda the lute and folk-songs—oh, what a time it was! Your father's romanticism of the 'nineties with gipsy girls and gipsy songs and his enthusiasm for anything that smacked of art, especially if it was rather amateurish—I was stuffed full of all this when I arrived in town. You see, I was really an uncannily pious child in my relations with my father, pious Æneas, I swallowed every word that proceeded out of his mouth without winking. Boys who have no mother are often like that, I've noticed—it's the mother who leads

the sons to criticize their father. Either she admires her husband and thus arouses her sons' critical faculty, or she criticizes him and they take note and have their eyes opened to his weaknesses. But when Aunt Kaja disapproved of father you may be sure it only strengthened my loyalty to him. And anything that aunt found fault with became at once great and noble. And you know, she found many faults in all of you."

"So it was really due to your aunt that you paid us so much attention?"

"Yes, and to Audhild and Turid and Hallgerd. They were the frogs that croaked in the pond and your sisters from Sumarlide were something like nymphs sporting on the bank—Heyerdahl and Eilif Petersen, but of course you don't remember that old painting of theirs. Well anyhow, Ragna was only a child, and when she got bigger it was obvious that she wasn't a bit of a nymph, but an extremely sensible person. And as soon as Gerda was grown up she had grown-up admirers and had nothing more to say to a raw youngster. Off and on I was desperately in love with her, but I couldn't keep it up when I had you for my companion—heavens, Nathalie, how sweet you were! I don't believe any boy has had so pretty—and so serious and genuine a girl friend! You've no idea how much I was in love with you!"

She shook her head: "You were in love with so many, Sverre."

"Not at all—that was only a kind of timidity, or shyness. I didn't dare to attempt the decisive attack on you until I *was* something—otherwise I was afraid you would only continue to look on me as your old schoolfellow, not exactly a brilliant figure. Well, the deuce knows what I thought, anyhow I was afraid of you in that way, and so

full of love for you that it flowed over and made me act as if I was in love with every skirt I met—or something like it. But all the same it was only you. Has never been any one else. Won't ever be any one else either, Nathalie. Even if I'm never to get you—you will always remain the only woman in my life."

Instinctively she withdrew her hand from his: "No, Sverre, Sverre——"

"Yes. If you won't have me this time either—hang it all, I won't promise not to take up again with somebody I happen to come across in a waiting-room, not once but many times. From old bad habit. Unfortunately we've got into the way of taking these casual affairs too lightly—that's quite wrong in reality, as I believe, and we're punished severely enough for these loose habits of ours. When we're sufficiently stricken in years and in the sear and yellow leaf. The sexagenarian who enters on a second childhood and imagines it's love when the old Adam awakes within him and demands his mutton. Huh, there's nothing that makes me shudder like coming across a case of this old pantaloon eroticism. And I know I shan't escape it either. That is, unless you and I—— For you know very well, don't you, that we could get enough out of life to be able to face the terrible years when they come without fear of the void. Think it over, Nathalie—you too will come to the point, sooner or later, when you will realize that you'll have to make haste if you still want anything of the male sex—erotics, or friendship, or simply a proof that you are still attractive. Think it over, I say, for in our day even the Magalonas are crazy with panic—allow themselves to be humiliated by any young cad, for to-morrow it will be too late for love. Don't you think yourself it would be better to make

things secure in good time—so that you can enter on those years in company with a man who knows who you are? Who's known you as long as I have? I love your whole life, you understand, the whole course of it. So that your life will be just as dear to me when it's ebbing out as it was when it was flowing in you—and I was as miserable as I could be because you went off with another——"

The fire was almost out—cosy and warm sitting in the dusk on the cushioned sofa, while the windows clattered feebly in the breeze and the sea boomed outside. Nathalie made no resistance as his arm stole round her shoulder and he drew her gently to him, so close that she could feel the warmth of him. But when he pressed her closer and his face grazed her cheek she pushed it away—without violence: "No, Sverre—

"——You must be terribly cynical—if this is meant to be a proposal? In reality you're proposing that I shall accept you—as a sort of old age insurance—in case later on I may not succeed in living in the celibacy to which I am involuntarily condemned! Isn't that what you've been saying?"

"I didn't put it *quite* so cynically, you know."

She moved a little farther away from him. "Well no, Sverre—I'm not prepared to take things so practically as *that*."

"What is there so terrible in admitting that it's not good for man to be alone? A man and a woman together, that's the most natural way for human beings to face what's in store for us in this world."

Nathalie made no reply.

"You know it's true, all that I've been saying to-night."

"It's true!" she mimicked him. "You're always saying that."

"Yes—to you I don't suppose I've ever said anything that was not true, Nathalie."

She shook her head:

"*You* believe that. But I believe you imagine that you have been much fonder of me than you were in reality. Not all those other affairs of yours were mere trifles——"

"Henriette, are you thinking of? Certainly that wasn't a mere trifle, but then it was only friendship—no, you needn't laugh, I don't mean to say it was platonic—besides, platonic friendship is only a confusion of ideas; platonic love is the right name. But all the same it was one of those waiting-room acquaintances. She was waiting, and I was waiting: when you came we were to take the train together and go off—God knows where we wouldn't go. Only you never came; I was on the point of giving you up, many a time, but never entirely. Well, Henriette and I met so to speak in the waiting-room, and it ended in our leaving the station together. I would gladly have married her, I liked her amazingly. But she wouldn't, she was too shrewd. She guessed exactly how much and how little I put into our relationship. I believe that if I had really been able to offer her something that *meant* love, she would have chosen me in preference to the other one, with all his money. She was not calculating, but she was cool-headed. It was quite reasonable that she should prefer a rich man who loved her to one whose income had ups and downs and who was fond of her, but much fonder of the wife of one of his friends. For we saw so much of one another at the time I was living with Henriette that you can understand her guessing how the land lay."

you——" He bent her head back. Nathalie trembled all through as though in uncertainty.

"You mustn't torture me like this, Sverre. It's not kind of you."

He did not take his eyes off her. Then he laughed, with the queer little laugh that they used to call his gipsy laugh in old days.

"No no, if you take it in that way I won't torture you."

"I believe it's fearfully late too," she complained. "I'm so tired——"

"Very well then." He kissed her. Nathalie received it—strangely calm and observant. His big nose was so odd against her face, but he kissed well, as though with conviction.

"Good night then, Nathalie, sleep well! You must be tired, poor girl, I didn't think of that. Well, now I'm going, as you say I must?"

It was cold around her when he let her go. But it was only her tiredness, and a slight dizziness from the wine she had drunk, that gave her body this sense of disappointment. Her head was clear enough to recognize that it was a folly she had abstained from committing——

She quickly tidied the room, undressed and crawled shivering into the strange bed, which surrounded her on all sides, cold and far too wide. And when once she lay there she had a comfortable sense of relaxation after this—clearing-up, or whatever one was to call it. She yawned with cold and tiredness and felt that now she would fall asleep at once.

She woke with a feeling that she had escaped from a

trap. But at the same time she felt a little uncertain and rather dreaded her next meeting with Sverre.

It was true of course that in a way she had overlooked something which she suspected, and merely taken advantage of being always able to count on her old friend Sverre. She had never given it a thought, but he did supply a small need of hers—she too liked to be admired for this or that which she knew Sigurd had failed to notice in her; she liked being waited on, liked little attentions which her conscious ideas of reciprocity in a love affair had not permitted her to fish for with Sigurd. The woman in the good old-fashioned style, the weaker and nobler half of mankind, to be spoilt and rallied a little by the man—she had never desired to be this for Sigurd. But to have a little taste of what it was like——?

She had never wished *in earnest* that any man should see anything of this sort in her. It had only been make-believe when Sverre had played the part of her cavalier—so she had believed! For him too, no doubt, the affair with Henriette Damm, for instance, had been earnest, while it lasted, and his fancy for herself joking and chaff, but with a little tender or sentimental undertone—they had been children together, his first attempted erotic flights had had her as their object. Of course she fully realized that he had once been deeply in love with her, while she had never been in love with Sverre Reistad, at any rate not enough to matter. Although she had once tried to imagine she was——

No, you're romancing, Sverre. Because you happen at the moment to be in the market, and I am unattached—— I fancy I see myself being caught in your net. It might have been pretty awful for both of us. But

it was no use denying that there was some consolation, or encouragement, in being made love to, or praised, by another man, when one's own had failed one so utterly——

When she came down to breakfast she found only the Aasen couple; the others had already had theirs.

The weather was brilliant, the sky blue and the air mild and radiant, with the sound of church-bells from inland. Sverre was down on the rocks when she came out on to the terrace; he discovered her at once and hurried back.

"You slept well, I hope?—that was good!"

The church-bells swelled and died away on the breeze.

"By the way, have you ever been in Holme church? Oh well, then we must really go up there after the service—it's perfectly charming inside, the most delightful rococo interior——"

He showed her over the main building from cellar to roof-terrace, and the garages and outhouses, and the little hot bath installation in the bath house. It was all so practical and so good; Nathalie was interested in the plan and fittings, partly for business reasons. And at the same time impatient in her heart of hearts.

Afterwards they went up to the church. It was really worth seeing. There was a good reredos too, some of the figures late medieval, and a monstrance, a choice piece of baroque silversmith's work.

Sverre proposed that they should take a little walk along the river. "But can you do so much walking with that foot of yours?" He explained that walking was just what he ought to do.

The lime-trees clung to the sheer cliffs on the north

side of the valley, bright with their pale yellow leaves. A few aspens were quite red and some had faded to a colour that reminded one of butter-beans, but the birches had the lovely warm tint of old gold. In the fields the after-grass showed up, a moist green against the autumnal splendour of the foliage, and the little farms along the valley dozed in Sunday peace under their great old-tiled roofs, on which the domed maples shed their motley leaves. Dear goodness, it *is* lovely here at home——

It was perfectly ridiculous, but she was rather nervous at the thought that they would be bathing together quite by themselves. Just because they had done it so often before—ooh, it was as though all these old memories held dangerous possibilities of new meanings.

But when they came down to Solstrand again the gong was already booming for dinner. Sverre had not said a word in allusion to their talk of the night before.

And even as they sat over their coffee on the terrace his car was heard driving up.

"Oh dash it, already! Well, then I'll have to say good-bye. I shall be back again for the week-end. Well, I hope you'll be comfortable here, Nathalie. It's my fault in a way that you've come here, so I feel a certain anxiety about your enjoying yourself. But if only this weather holds——"

She was angry with herself, and thought it comic at the same time, but she was a little disappointed when he had gone. Oh, but it *does* make one feel foolish, when one is prepared to be sensible, resigned, and to keep a man gently at arm's length—and then he doesn't give one a chance of showing the slightest trace of emotion. Ooh, one doesn't know much of one's own frailties so long as one is snugly enveloped in love and happiness. But

if one is thrown out of this, one comes to know a good many things about oneself.

The bathe was grand. But the air was chilly enough to make one dress in a hurry and take a brisk walk along the beach afterwards.

CHAPTER TWO

THE first few mornings she awoke to a world of white fog, soft and wet. At times it was so thick that when she walked on the beach she could barely distinguish the nearest islets. One might imagine it was the sea itself that reached in below the wall of mist and swallowed up the rocks. The chock-chock of an invisible motor boat and the sound of someone rowing out in the fog gave her a feeling of infinite loneliness.

The short grass in the crevices of the rock was withered, and the flowers to be found on the beach were seeding. Those of the geranium kind had blood-red petals and the crane's-bills stood out in orange. And all the blue-green and yellow-green plants with bunched stalks and fleshy leaves were faded and rough. She had known the names of all of them when she was at school—botany was one of the few subjects that had interested her. Or perhaps interest was too strong a word, or she would not have given it up as soon as she left school. But at any rate it had amused her to gobble up a lot of rather unsystematic knowledge of botany and geology and insects and birds. And a hobby of this sort gave her and Sverre Reistad an excuse for roaming about together. It was extraordinary, how she was always being reminded of all that they had had in common during their adolescence—now that she was back among old scenes. Alone—deserted by him who had dominated the whole grown-

up part of her life. All things considered it was almost fantastic, how near and realistic were the memories that came back to her of many things that had been forgotten or blurred while she was living with Sigurd.

But all the same it would be too far-fetched to suspect Sverre of being cunning enough to have calculated all this. On the whole she preferred to think that all this about his unalterable love for her through all their varied independent experiences was something he had just invented. As he had once invented all those stories about his gipsy grandfather. In order to make himself interesting. He had always had a weakness for that. It was quite true that she had fallen in love with Sigurd Nordgaard because, among other things, he was perfectly natural.

One thing Sverre had said was so true that it gave her a feeling of inward bleeding when she woke up at night and recalled it. That time after the bankruptcy, when Sigurd had nothing to do, but she was at work, that had been a crisis, though neither of them would admit it. With his reason he had accepted the situation: it was a good thing that she at any rate had her employment. But with his instincts he had never quite got over it. Something was changed in their most intimate relations. Even during that first winter, when they were not officially married and had to contend with many worries and difficulties, he had always possessed her with a sort of animal innocence. As though he was haughtily cocksure that they had come together because they *were* to belong to each other. At that time his haughty spirit had vanished, but they had both tried to persuade themselves that this was merely the order of nature—no love escapes a change of colour as time goes on.

One night she dreamt she was in the big room at Rafstad. Actually it was not particularly handsome—the heavy logs of the walls were painted light red, the press and sideboard were stained walnut with white marbled panels. The fixed benches and the old long table had been allowed to remain at the south end, but against the wall by the stove stood a mahogany suite upholstered in green rep which the old sheriff had bought at an auction. All the same there was a peculiar air of comfort about this room, she could never recall it without pleasure. But in her dream she merely felt uneasy at being there. Her father-in-law was having an after-dinner nap on the sofa—Sigurd was not in the room, but she knew he was rummaging out in the kitchen. They seemed to be going somewhere, and she was afraid they would be late——

Patience—the memory of all dreams fades quickly. She remembered having dreamt something horrid about Sverre a while ago; she had felt quite miserable about it on waking, but now the impression was effaced like that of a film exposed to the sun.

In the course of the afternoon the sun broke through and the weather became brilliantly autumnal, as warm as summer. Nathalie had the bathing house to herself—Berg and Jandel bathed from one of the islands, and Fru Aasen explained that she and her husband had finished for this year; there had been so many stinging jelly-fish about lately.

Nathalie took long walks. One day she crossed the ridge and went as far as the creek, but there were new people in the house by the boat-building yard. And she was actually so nervous that she did not care to walk home through the forest alone. She did not like meeting

cows and loose horses, and when she surprised a family of ducks by the old pond it gave her such a start that she was shaking a long time after. She took the road back to Holmekilen.

Next day she had intended to go up to the old mine. But after passing the last cottage she was so oppressed by the loneliness of the forest that she turned back.

Fru Aasen came running after her one day when she was bound for the village store—she joined Nathalie. She was bursting to express her astonishment over Berg and Jandel and came out with it almost at once—didn't Fru Nordgaard think too that they were a queer couple? Evidently she found it extremely thrilling, could it be the sort of thing she had read so much about—well, a case of perversity, you know? Nathalie got some amusement out of disappointing her hopes; she put on the most consoling expression she could summon and assured her it was perfectly innocent. For that matter she was inclined to believe it was so—on Berg's part. The old gentleman presumably had a weakness for the boy and ignored the possibility of this being attributed to other reasons than the official one: that Jandel was to be an artist and Berg was helping him on. No sooner had Jandel found out that she managed House and Home than he overwhelmed her with a heap of drawings—designs for book-plates and tapestries and this, that and arthe other, all very ugly. He appeared to be extraordinarily of avoid of talent, but to have a certain proficiency in sure ving models. But then Bernhard Berg had no great belong or art either. Fru Aasen had got hold of the two had vanisie had published some twenty-five years ago and selves that n lending them to Nathalie. They were senti-escapes a chaish, but one of them had had a success in its

day, she remembered now—the other girls at the drawing-school had thought it fine and charming. Berg himself by the way was quite a nice old fellow. But it was odd all the same how she dropped into all kinds of memories possible and impossible of her own prehistoric time—here at this ultra-modern bathing hotel of Sverre's.

However, she did not see very much of the other visitors. They played bridge in the evenings in the hearth-room. But Nathalie had never been a keen card-player, and since her marriage she had hardly played anything but simple games at children's parties; Sigurd had a positive dislike of cards. He had seen too much of it at home—the old people at Tangen had had good reason for thinking it sinful, he had once told her, and his mother had always been sorry when his father ordered the boys to the card-table.

Sigurd and Sigurd and Sigurd—— Her one feeling was that she was an exile, and she wondered whether she would ever accustom herself to living without him. At times she caught herself longing to be back at the office; there in any case her day was occupied. Though there was much to be dreaded when she returned to town. When Sigurd had moved his things Hildur was to pack hers, she had promised to do that. They had let the apartment—she would have to find some place in the course of the autumn. But she didn't care to think of that now.

She had a fire in her room every evening; that was comfortable at any rate, and so she sat there by herself, reading or sewing, went early to bed and read herself to sleep.

One day her mother announced that she was coming to dinner, with two friends who also wanted to see Solstrand Baths—"Aunt Marie and Fru Bühre, you don't mind

that, do you, Thali dear?" That evening the rain settled over the country and it was pouring steadily, with a dense mist, as she walked up to the post office, where the motor coach stopped at this time of year.

Mamma had brought Girlie too—Little Minda was staying away from school because of a headache, she explained, and it would be quieter for Ragna if she came out with them. It was rather crowded in the little hearth-room with such an invasion. Nathalie got the keys and showed her mother and the ladies round—the main building, the garages, the little hot bath establishment. They were wildly enthusiastic and expressed a desire to spend their holidays here next summer, each outdoing the other in keenness. "And so interesting that it should be Sverre Reistad's——" "Aunt Marie" had been their teacher at school. "I always said that boy would come to something." Fru Bühre was distantly related to Fru Wille's husband. The old ladies became absorbed in the topic of Sverre Reistad and constantly reminded Nathalie of one thing and another in her schooldays. Minda sat glaring like an owl; goodness knows what the child's thinking, no doubt she's criticizing us all, thought her aunt.

Nathalie had hoped they would not accept her invitation to stay to supper—the motor coach returned at seven. But they agreed to share a car, and they held on till past eleven. Nathalie was nearly crying with tiredness the last hour.

On Saturday morning the coach brought parcels for Fru Nordgaard. From Sverre—sweets and books. Enclosed was a note. He had been looking forward so much to coming down, but had been prevented. Hoped she was still comfortable and having a real good rest.

Still——? What had put it into his head that she was enjoying herself here at all! She went over in her mind all the things she had to put up with at Solstrand: the situation of the place, shut in on the creek, Fru Pedersen's cooking which was downright bad. The cleanliness was only so-so—but indeed those low, broad chairs and sofas were extremely unpractical, you couldn't get underneath them either with a vacuum cleaner or a duster. Oh, how horribly unhygienic it must be here in the season, when visitors were constantly coming and going and there was no chance of cleaning out the room properly.

Then she stopped and laughed. So she was as disappointed as that, at his not coming. But she was bored, that was the fact. She never used to be bored when alone —but that was in former days, when she always looked forward in her heart to meeting Sigurd again.

It was *not* amusing here. Berg and Jandel had asked her to go out in the motor boat one day; they were going to one of the islands. But what is there to do on these little rocks at this time of year?—one can't bathe and one can't make coffee. And it was true that the water was infested with jelly-fish. The Aasens were leaving on Sunday—they were no great loss though. But as for spending her whole holiday here, no, she couldn't face that.

Some people had appeared in the summer cottages—no doubt to spend a week-end while the fine weather lasted. But she did not know any of them.

In the evening she walked along the beach in broken moonlight—great black clouds with bright edges sailed across the pale blue evening sky. But she kept down by the sea—no longer had courage for walking inland at night.

No, she made up her mind to go back to Oslo in a week; the rest of her holiday she could take when there was snow on the ground. Fru Totland was obviously glad when Nathalie announced on the telephone: "I'm coming in on Monday or Tuesday." Poor woman, she did not seem particularly well, but now she would soon get leave.

The weather was nothing to boast about in this second week. On the Friday it rained heavily from early morning, but in the course of the day it cleared and the sun was shining when Nathalie went out after dinner. The road was deep in mud, but the moss and lichen on the old stone walls gleamed with a fresh luxuriance when the sun caught them. The woodland soil was now at its richest—with fallen birch-leaves among the red bilberry scrub, bright cranberries wreathed around ant-hills and old stumps, an infinity of mosses, and fungus of every possible shape and colour. Golden clavaria, scarlet and leather-brown toadstools with white beads, pale mauve fungus and a kind of greyish-blue milk-mushroom which looked extraordinarily beautiful, growing where the carpet of moss was thin and the paths were covered with fallen pine-needles.

She had gone over the fence into the wood when a car came along the road outside. Why, it was Sverre's. He did not see her, as he drove through the puddles, splashing muddy water all about.

What had brought him here to-day——? Nathalie followed the path she happened to have taken. It led across the tongue of land between Holmekilen and the creek. The wind had opened up the view in many places where the trees were mostly deciduous. There was a kind of willow whose fallen leaves were quite violet on

the under side, with a silvery tinge from damp—ever since she was a child she had thought them so beautiful. Strange by the way that the leaves always fall with the under side up. How was it she had come to talk about this to Gerda one day—Gerda had said something, hadn't she, about living with the right side of oneself exposed to view—or had *she* said that? The leaves at any rate die with the wrong side uppermost.

From a bare crag she had a view of the sea right out to the horizon. The water was dark blue and the sky light, streaked with scuds of cloud. It was wet sitting in the heather, but she was so wet already that it made no difference. She would sit down and have a cigarette.

Below the crag lay a bog with some pools of water, almost choked with yellowed sedges. It must have been there that she had met the cows the other day—so she could take that path to go home. In the spruces behind her there was a fluttering of little birds which her eyes could not discover—tits she thought they were, or what Sigurd called creepers——

At times it almost seemed as if her whole life with Sigurd could not be really true. This was because it was so bitter that she could not bring herself to recall it clearly—now that she knew how much of the happiness in which she had felt so secure had never been anything but illusion. In a way she had been in good faith when she imagined that nothing could part them—but all the time she had purposely overlooked a good deal that might have warned her of the danger that they were slipping away from each other. Now it seemed she must acknowledge, knowing him as she did, that he would certainly adjust himself to his new life. The memory of the sixteen years he had lived with her would fade, in a

few years his life with his new wife and children would seem to him a sort of direct continuation of the youth in which the episode with herself was only a parenthesis——

One kind of moss she had not found here—the vividly pale-green sort that grows in cushions along little water-courses in the mountains. Always beaded with drops of water, and generally you find with it a delicate little red-stalked willow-herb which is also at home in the mountains. This moss they used to take home and make a border of it round the hearth-stone when they decorated the sæter for Sunday—Sigurd had taught her to do this, saying it was their custom in those parts——

And now she would never again visit those mountains where she and he had been together. And already it was as though the mountains had only existed in a dream——

Down on the bog-land she took a wrong path; it led her at last to a great stretch of level ground by the water. Rain-clouds were now gathering again, the sea looked brownish and grey beneath them. This melancholy evening light was so familiar—awoke an echo of moods and feelings of the time she was a young girl and seized upon every gloomy impression of nature in order to assimilate it to her own vague feelings—of impatience with all that held her back in her home, her school and the little town, of anticipation of all that she called in her thoughts "life." The autumnal meadow with its tall lonely juniper bushes, the roar of the waves and the white gleam of the line of surf along the beach, the tufts of couch-grass stirring uneasily on the belt of sand and the dark border of seaweed at highwater-mark—all this belonged to the same mood. She had not heard of any Sigurd then.

With a certain feeling of satisfaction she realized that

she would arrive definitely too late at the supper-table. She could not make her way round the point; she had to go back to the high ground. She declined to inquire of herself why she wished to arrive too late; she was no longer afraid of walking along the forest paths by herself, though it was rapidly growing dark—and when the rain began to fall again she was almost exhilarated.

It was quite dark when she got home. "Heavens above, where have you been in this weather!" cried Sverre Reistad; he threw the front door open the moment she thundered on the knocker. "I had no idea which way to look for you, or I'd have gone to meet you."

"Good evening. Why, what's brought you here to-day? But my dear man, you haven't been waiting for me? Well well, I hope you're not too hungry, for I shall have to change—I'm as wet as a fish——"

It was a treat to change everything in front of the little fire in her room. She put her hair straight and freshened up her face. The chain of agate and jade and Chinese coins which Sverre had given her once when he came back from abroad went well with her rust-red silk dress.

"Why, how grand!" Nathalie made her voice sound bright. The table had been moved in front of the hearth and there were candles on it. It was laid for two. Sverre explained that Berg and Jandel had gone to the town for the movies.

"I'm as hungry as a hunter—oh, how lovely!" Fru Pedersen came in with a big crayfish—from Fardal, Sverre explained, he had bought it on the way. "Well, *skaal*, Nathalie, it's a good thing you've settled down at last. But I say, what does this mean——?" He had spoken to House and Home the day before and they

told him that if he waited till Monday he could speak to Fru Nordgaard herself.

"It won't do for me to be away longer after all." Nathalie explained about Fru Totland.

"Then it's not that you haven't been comfortable here?"

"Oh no, it's not too bad." That is to say, it was really too late for the seaside. And the other visitors were all right in their way, but not the sort of people to spend a fortnight with.

"And you were thinking of staying all by yourself at Gusslund. Let me tell you one thing, Nathalie, I don't believe it's so good for you to be alone as you think yourself."

"Alone in a place where there are no others is quite a different thing from being alone where there *are* people. Besides——" His smile irritated her, making her blurt out all her complaints against the place—Fru Pedersen's slimy sauces, her potatoes, half-raw or boiled to rags, the faulty cleaning and the awkward furniture which made sweeping impossible. Altogether she didn't think Solstrand would ever take its place as a first-class hotel——

"Hush, hush, for mercy's sake you mustn't say that!" Sverre was laughing heartily. "Damn it all, if the Company gets to know that you criticize the place so pitilessly I shan't be able to pass you any more orders." He was not responsible for the furniture, not alone at any rate. And the establishment had nothing to do with Fru Pedersen's catering, she had undertaken simply as an act of kindness to provide for a few borders in the annexe in the off-season.

"You boasted that she was splendid," scoffed Nathalie.

"Well, then my impression was wrong——"

"In reality you don't know *anything* about cooking, let me tell you! You try to make out you're frightfully particular, a gourmet and a connoisseur of wine and God knows what. You're so terribly anxious to be taken for a swell and a man of the world, Sverre, but in reality——"

"——In reality I'm the little innocent from Berdal who thought you lived in luxury at Sumarlide, compared with what I was accustomed to."

"Uff!"

"Yes, uff. But do have something to eat and drink, Nathalie—this is good anyhow, isn't it?"

"But that time you were Henriette Damm's paying guest? Her cooking was simply miraculous. She was the last word in housekeeping."

"I should think she was—that was where she showed herself an artist——"

"I can't understand why you didn't marry her."

"You know that if you care to hear why it didn't come off"—he looked at her with a sort of smile—"there's nothing it would please me so much to tell you. Once again, and as many times as you will listen to me, Nathalie."

"No, Sverre——" When he got up and came round the table to her she made a little deprecating gesture, but she was so tired.

"I'm just going up for a wash," she said, showing her hands. The table at which they had been eating crayfish looked pretty in a way, untidy as it was—but the bright red shells made a fine show in the light of the candles which had burnt down almost to their sockets.

"Can't we go up to your room—Fru Pedersen will have gone home by now."

The rain was streaming down the window-panes, and

when Nathalie opened the door on to the terrace it was coming down like a wall and splashing up from the pavement. The weather seemed to have decided the matter—it ringed her in with Sverre Reistad.

Up in her room he got the fire to blaze up while she washed and washed herself in the little alcove.

She had filled her room with autumn foliage and red and black berries in vases. On the mantelpiece and on the writing-table were bowls full of mosses and fungus—delicate little morels and coral-like clavaria. Nathalie felt a sudden and overwhelming sorrow at the sight of them—it must not be that no one cared, when she had made her room so pretty and homelike. She did not wish to be alone, she had been alone so long, so long already——"

"I am tired, Sverre—I think I'll go to bed at once."

"Yes, do. May I come in when you're in bed?"

She began to cry. When he came and took her in his arms she cried still more. It did her good to be embraced and rocked. At last it was her turn to be the poor little thing for someone to pick up and fuss over. "Well, well, come in then," she whimpered. "If you really care for me—silly as I am——"

"Thank God you are," he whispered, and nearly kissed her breath away before releasing her.

Quick as lightning she undressed, slipped into the big bed and huddled against the wall. She had put out all the candles except one on the mantelpiece; the light of it flickered over ceiling and walls and the rain beat against the windows. As though she had cast herself out through time and night and lay here, a pitiable little doll-child with eyes wide open, Nathalie waited.

——He came, wrapped in a kind of black silk mantle,

embroidered with a big chrysanthemum in gold on one shoulder. And through all her sense of intoxication, of dizzy soaring in the desire to forget and lose herself in an act of insanity, there was still a grain of cold sagacity in her mind—God, how like Sverre to be strutting about in that mandarin's costume, for that was what it must be——

Next moment he had thrown off his disguise and crept in beside her. With a shock of dismay she felt him clutch her to him, and knew that now it was he who had taken the game out of her hands—she no longer had anything to say in it——

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN she woke it was getting light outside—a white fog pressed against the window. She was alone in bed—then she remembered what she had done. She lay still as though paralysed. And at once there came back to her the memory of other times when she had waked with a feeling of shame and consternation over something she had dreamt—and the relief when she came to her senses: thank God, it was only a dream. Now it seemed as if these should have warned her, and she had paid no heed to them.

Nathalie flung her hands before her face, threw herself round and lay crouched against the wall. The theatrical gesture helped her—she had found vent for her first unreasoning despair. For an instant the thought hovered before her—*was* it then so frightful——?

She felt a hard cold lump dragging at her night-dress over her breast. A brooch—— Nathalie took it off, sat up and stared at it, quite dumbfounded.

A whacking great brute of a brooch it was, in early Victorian style—but handsome in its way. Coiled and twisted bands of gold, enamelled in dark-green and salmon-pink, with some big pearls in the centre and three pendants set with pearls. Henriette Damm had had one like it, only hers was smaller and the dominating colour was dark blue. Sverre had given it to her one time when

he came back from Copenhagen—it was said to have belonged to Countess Danner.

It was so funny that she was inclined to laugh, and yet in a way it was touching. What Sverre had thought as he decorated her with this royal morning-gift before going back to his own room was perhaps very touching. And at the same time she had a creeping sense of aversion, and her anxiety took a more definite form.

Oh yes, she had good reason to be dismayed at what she had done. She was caught, and certainly Sverre would not lightly let her go, now that at last he had got her where he wanted her. It was enough to make one laugh and cry.

But actually she did not know why she should suddenly feel such boundless distrust of Sverre Reistad just because she had voluntarily accepted him as her lover. And there was no denying it—she had allowed herself to be carried away last night. Perhaps that was why she felt so revolted—she had had a lover, a satisfactory and very sympathetic lover. But she could not cheat herself into the belief that she loved him.

But then she had always been fond of him in a way, had confidence in him, as a friend. Indeed she counted on his friendship as an asset in her life, a good and well-secured possession. Only she had always been certain that it was she who detremined the footing on which they were to meet.

What alarmed her was this thought which haunted her—that in bringing her here he had acted according to a cunning, well thought-out plan. But then she thrust it aside—after all he was not such a schemer as that, he could not *know* she would be affected in this way by these home surroundings, her loneliness, the despondent

weariness that had possessed her after all the shocks of this summer. This would mean that he knew her much better than she knew herself—and that she did not really know Sverre. She had never taken the trouble to know him except from one particular side. *Cicisbeism*, she remembered, was the title of a story by Mauritz Hansen —no doubt it described the relations between a married woman and a man whom she kept to fetch and carry for her.

Ugh, she was afraid of him. But the probability was that she was less suited than most women to embark on adventures of this sort; what Sverre called the erotic scheme had never included in her case the problem of how one may retire with the best grace from a love affair—— And an instinct within her protested against her delivering up her freedom into Sverre's hands——

At a knock on the door she started up—guessing that she must have fallen asleep again after all. But when Sverre came in and she saw the expression on his face she had to smile—Lord, how pleasantly ugly he was! The memory of her bitter meditations on first awaking became unreal. After all, why should it be so terrible? Better to be cheerful and make the best of it—wasn't it Sverre, her oldest friend in the world? She returned his kisses and guessed with a shade of anxiety in her joy, that his over her bi[illegible] always make her *feel differently* towards sat up and star[illegible]d when he was not present.

A whacking [illegible] Victorian style—[illegible]e gave an embarrassed laugh when she twisted bands of [illegible]. He had had it put away for many salmon-pink, with s[illegible] to have it, that was the idea all the pendants set with p[illegible] been fifteen years in your business— like it, only hers was [illegible]d make a celebration for you then, was dark blue. Sverre[illegible]d so on."

Nathalie shook her head—now she liked his hand as it played about her wrist. "Fancy your remembering the day! I'm sure you were the only one who did——"

"I guessed that. That was why I wouldn't remind you of it. Oh yes, I've always remembered things of that sort when it was you. But then I let it lie—in case there should be an opportunity——

"——I had it with me a fortnight ago. I half hoped it was going to be a sort of elopement when I drove you out here." He laughed. "Now I shall have to carry you off to Oslo instead—if you're really serious about going back on Sunday."

"I've already secured a berth, for to-morrow night. Ragna's little girl's to be christened, so I must start early."

"But then I'll ring up Ragna and tell her I'm here. Then she'll ask me too."

"Are you mad? I don't suppose you've brought clothes with you either——"

"Surely I'm not expected to turn up in evening dress—on a flying visit like this?"

"My dear man, it's been arranged in grand style. That brother of Mads from America is coming to christen her, they've put off their sailing simply on this account. There's a whole heap of them. And old Fru Adler's to hold the child and at least one of her daughters will be there. I think Ragna said we shall we twenty-two at the table."

"Very well. You don't want to have me there, I see that." She certainly did not. The mere thought of trooping up with him in a family gathering of this kind brought back the shivering anxiety of early morning.

"What are you going to wear?"

"I got something new—grey chiffon velvet. It's hanging in the wardrobe there," she said, to smooth things over. Sverre had always noticed when she put on something new and pretty. He went straight to the wardrobe and opened it. "I'm sure that must suit you charmingly. Same colour as your eyes. Can't I drive you there anyway?"

"We're to go straight to the church, you know. I shall change at mamma's."

"Nothing doing—is that what you mean?"

Nathalie laughed: "You'll have a chance of seeing me in it another time."

"I believe there's a new play at the National Theatre next week—shall we go?"

"We can talk about that later. But look here, I must really get up."

He was already at the door, when he turned and said, as though excited at his happy thought:

"But, Nathalie—you know you can have breakfast brought up on a tray. Wouldn't you prefer that?"

"No, indeed I would not!" She laughed. "I've always hated meals in bed."

"Yes yes," he said, beaming. "I'd far rather have breakfast with you to-day, you know."

No sooner was she alone than the gloomy feeling returned, of being a prisoner. As when they played "oranges and lemons" in the nursery—that also ended in one's being taken prisoner and having to choose whether one would have oranges or lemons. But there was nothing terrifying in that. She tried to persuade herself that this was no worse.

At Rafstad they always brought them coffee and cakes in bed, while they were waiting for the room to be warm

enough for them to get up. The birch-logs hissed in the stove; they were often coated with ice. But having coffee in bed was a part of Christmas at Rafstad. It was true that at other times she did not like it.

Her heart quivered between feelings of repugnance and the sense of a new hope. Was it only her fancy that made her think Berg and Jandel and Fru Pedersen must all guess from Sverre's manner the turn their relations had taken? And that this was his object—to strengthen his position, make it more difficult for her to escape from him? And he was so sweet and charming to her, happy in such a pleasing way that it made her happy; after all, why couldn't she learn to be fond of her old companion in a new way, wasn't she that already?—Sverre, poor man, had no means of knowing that in her secret heart she contemplated flight. It would have been downright unseemly of him to suspect her of anything of the sort—after last night!

The sun came out while they were at breakfast.

"Are you properly shod? Yes. Shall we walk over the hill and down to the creek? It's such a pretty path by the ponds——"

"I've been there. I nearly always went over the hill when I took a walk. There's another place I'd rather go to." She paused a moment. "Do you remember an old mine where we went once? I think it's inland in the Ravnedal direction."

"Mökkelaasen, I know it very well," he said cheerfully. "So you remember our going there? Gerda was with us, and Nikolai, and that fellow from Telemark who took honours in theology afterwards; do you remember what his name was?"

"Dreng Bondal—yes, he did well at the university. It was awfully romantic up there, I thought. We dropped stones into a yawning black gulf and heard them splash into water a long way down. There was a little waterfall too. And Dreng and Nikolai collected specimens of rock——

"——There's a story of Mauritz Hansen's about an old mine; I always imagined that was the scene of it. Do you remember we borrowed Mauritz Hansen from the Wingfeldts? I've never read anything of his since, but I wonder if he hasn't written a lot of good things? There's so much life in some of his stories."

"Would you like to have them? I expect I could get them second-hand."

"No, Sverre, you mustn't start that. Wanting to give me all sorts of things."

"Not if it amuses me?"

It was not the road she had struck when walking here the other day—they had to go farther up the river, Sverre said. The alder thicket looked so well with the sun on the grey stems, now that the tops were light and airy and the remaining leaves were a pale sickly green. A flock of finches twittered away in front of them, hanging with their light breasts up and picking at the alders.

——And he didn't make too much fuss about this new state of things between them. Where the road was wide enough he took her hand and swung it as they walked. Was he playing at their being boy and girl again?

They came out of the wood by an old farm which lay off the road under a steep cliff. Here the corn was not yet carried, and the houses looked ancient and grey, with their paint almost worn off by wind and weather.

"Ravnaas. It's haunted, you know."

"It looks as if it might be."

"Surely you've heard about old Jonas Ravnaas, and old Nick holding the parson's horse when he came to give him the sacrament? Why, he was your grandfather —he was curate here at Riisnes and Holme as a young man, Nikolai Söegaard."

"Now you speak of it I remember papa telling us something of the sort once. But you know, he wasn't on very good terms with grandfather, he never talked much about him."

"Anyhow, Jonas Ravnaas haunts this place. And down at the creek, at the boat-building yard, there's a whole crowd of ghosts——"

The road beyond was grass-grown, it wound like a soft green ribbon through a fine forest of tall sighing firs. Sverre stopped, took her in his arms and pressed her to him: "Nathalie! Shall we buy a place out here? To spend our summers. And when we grow old we'll move down here for good and go in for bees and rabbits and chicker and that sort of thing—and sit in the sun and let the m grow on us."

CHAPTER FOUR

HER work at the office came to have a new meaning for her that autumn. She had always acknowledged that she was more happily situated than most women—or men either for that matter: she had work in which she could really take an interest, honestly and loyally. She might easily have had a better paid situation, but preferred to stay where she was; there she was relatively independent. And of course in a way she had liked being financially independent too. And there had been times in her married life with Sigurd when everything would have been more difficult, had she not been able to provide for herself. For many years—as long as she still hoped, month by month, that she might have a child—she had had dreams of how wonderful life would be when once she could give up working outside her own home. She had always had a deep sense of joy on finishing any work in the house—cleaning up a bedroom, when the sun shone in at the open window and the floor was still wet from being washed. Or laying the table nicely after cooking a good meal. They had been brought up so undomestically that both she and Gerda had come to regard all domestic work as a fine art. Now she was no longer so sure that she could have accustomed herself to economic dependence on a husband—oh yes, yes, she could have, if it had been Sigurd——

But now she began to feel that her situation in House and Home was a strategic position. She could fall back on it if—well, if Sverre went too far in his zeal for arranging her life for her. She would not confess to herself that in her heart she would prefer not to marry him. It was true that when they were alone together she was in love with him to a certain extent. But no sooner was she by herself than her muttering anxiety returned: she had always shrunk from *using* the erotic harmony which she could bring about with him she loved so that it should form a binding link in case they did not enjoy one another's society even when sated with mutual caresses. Talk about the horrors of married people not getting the full pleasure out of their nights—the misfortune is due just as often to their not going well in double harness; their nights forge a chain which they are unable to break however they may tug at it, each pulling a different way all day long. She had a feeling that she and Sverre would hardly come to pull well together. But he was an insinuating lover, and he always managed to make her weak and pliant. But afterwards she had a disagreeable impression that it was his proficiency, his practice in the art of love that enabled him to vanquish her.

Meanwhile it appeared that he was absolutely set on binding her. She still thought this extraordinary. It must be owing to obstinacy, just as much as love, that he had never been able to reconcile himself to the abandonment of what he called his erotic pattern, but had kept it put away somewhere within him, in case he should have an opportunity of realizing it one day.

And when her divorce was in order it would probably come to his marrying her. But the thought made her uneasy—Sverre would administer her life so thoroughly,

and she did not care to allow herself to be administered in that way.

"You can't go on living here—not nearly comfortable enough for you," he had announced decisively, the first time he came to see her at the hotel. He went straight off to find her an apartment. He knew of something that would just suit her—for it would be absurd for her to buy a flat in one of the new blocks. Between two new houses in the neighbourhood of St. Hans' Hill there was an old wooden villa; it would be pulled down when the road was made through, but that wouldn't be either this year or next, Sverre assured her. Implying, before that time you'll be married to me.

Nathalie did not think the place looked particularly attractive. It was a villa with a ground floor and a small upper story, surrounded by the remains of a garden. Some big old elms just outside the windows made the rooms dark. And nevertheless Sverre succeeded in planting her there before she could say a word—she hardly knew how it had come about that she had taken the upper floor and signed the contract.

"There's no sense in your buying furniture," Sverre declared. Sigurd had let their old apartment furnished; and besides, she would not have cared to take much from there. "You can borrow some things from me. And then you know your mother has stored a lot of the drawing-room furniture, there was no room for it in her new house. I'm sure she'll be pleased to let you have it." Sverre rang up Ragna, and Sverre arranged about the delivery. Mamma and Ragna evidently assumed that she was now engaged to Sverre Reistad.

No doubt the whole staff of House and Home had come to the same conclusion, seeing how Sverre was

constantly on the telephone and came to fetch her and gave good advice without being asked. She mentioned this to him, in a rather irritated tone, one evening when he came to see her in her new rooms; he was to help her to put them straight.

"I didn't know it," he said reflectively. "Am I worse than I used to be about giving you advice? I expect that's always been a fault of mine. But I never noticed before that you objected to it so strongly."

That was true—Sverre had always had a weakness for giving people advice. And in former days she had liked to sit concocting schemes with him, about things which were not so very important.

"Yes, but you're no longer content with giving me advice. At least, you seem now to take it for granted that when you've given me a piece of advice I'm to follow it and there's no more to be said. The end of it will be," she said hotly, "that people will believe it's *I* who have run away from my husband because I wanted another man——"

"Well, what if they do think that? Are you so anxious for everybody to know it was your husband who left you for another?"

Nathalie was silent.

"For it seems to me the latter version must be more wounding to your pride."

"My pride——" She shrugged her shoulders. They stood looking at one another, and neither said any more.

Nathalie moved into her new quarters on a Saturday, and Sverre stayed the night with her. They breakfasted together next morning in her new sitting-room. It had a dark dado and a paper in imitation of stamped leather,

reminding her of the drawing-room paper at home. The old-fashioned bluish-green plush furniture looked bright and handsome, as long at any rate as the sun shone on it—the whole interior reminded her of Sumarlide. And Sverre remarked it at the same moment. "You've got a cosy place here. It reminds one of your old home. And that *was* mighty cosy, in its own curious way—I think."

Was that what he wanted to play at, she wondered—that she was once more Nathalie of Sumarlide and it was *that* Nathalie he had got? But had not she forced herself to believe that when once Sigurd had married his little Anne he would soon feel as if he had taken up his life again from the point where she had broken into it; that all the years they had lived together would condense into a foreign body in his consciousness and be precipitated? Had Sverre the same belief about her?

She was filled with kindness towards him, knowing how naïve it was if he thought this. That made them good friends for the whole of that day. It was no use regretting now—better to make the best of what had happened.

He always called her Nathalie, had always done so, and that pleased her so much. Thali was frightfully ugly, she had always hated being called that at home, but they all did so, and when Sigurd heard it he too called her Thali, Thali dear——

She was obliged to do a good deal of Fru Totland's work. Poor Alfhild Totland was evidently having a bad time. Terribly troublesome she was now, and nervous and depressed as well. Nathalie was not sorry to have a chance of checking the other's affairs rather more closely, while at the same time lightening her work. Not that

there had been any irregularities in Fru Totland's book-keeping of late. But Nathalie had taken upon herself a responsibility when she put things straight for her that time. And Fru Totland's finances seemed pretty desperate. She was constantly coming to Nathalie to ask for an advance on her salary; she had already "borrowed" of Nathalie the gratuity they were generally given at the New Year; that was for baby linen—and now she began borrowing small sums continually—there was often some little thing she had to buy to take home. "I think I ought to make things a little comfortable for my husband just now. I'm afraid he'll be on short commons while I'm away."

She had now accustomed herself to look upon Nathalie as a sort of providence which was ready to lend her a hand as a matter of course whenever she needed it. But no one had ever troubled to help Alfhild Totland before. Her father had not dared to spend anything on his children by his first wife after they had left the lower school, she said once. The little education they had got had to be paid for out of the small sum left them by their mother; their stepmother insisted on this.

Fru Totland was to be given leave from the first of November. But one day at the end of October she was taken so ill in the middle of the forenoon that Nathalie offered to get a taxi for her. "You must go home, there's no question about that."

Fru Totland looked up at her over the edge of the glass of water that Nathalie handed her. Her eyes were terror-stricken; underneath the powder the brown patches on her face showed up grimly against the grey pallor. "Can't you come with me, Fru Nordgaard? I'm so terribly afraid!"

Nathalie put on her hat and jacket. Perhaps it was just as well for someone to be with Fru Totland.

In the taxi she kept squeezing Nathalie's hand. "Oh, I'm so frightened, I'm so frightened. You must stay with me, Fru Nordgaard—oh, do stay with me! I must go there at once, to the lady I'm to go to. It's coming already, you understand—oh, do please go with me!"

She really looked as if it might be true. "But it's a whole month too soon, Fru Totland——"

"No, it's not, this is the time." She dug out a latch-key. "My trunks are in the hall—a big brown one and a hand-bag. Oh, do go with me, Fru Nordgaard!"

"But wouldn't it be better for your husband——?"

"No, no, I won't have Tobben with me, he can't do anything anyway."

Fortunately the driver seemed to be a sensible, elderly family man who comforted her while they were up fetching the baggage. The hall was stuffy. A door stood wide open to a room in which Totland sat at a breakfast-table that had not been cleared. He came out on hearing strangers in the hall.

"Your wife is taken ill."

He was not fully dressed and looked unwashed. Only his reddish hair shone neatly with its permanent wave around his good-looking boyish face—Jandel, thought Nathalie, until now she had been puzzled to think who it could be that Jandel reminded her of. Tobben Totland put on an overcoat and followed the driver and Nathalie downstairs. He was in slippers.

Nathalie stood a little to one side while husband and wife took leave of one another. It was done with surprising rapidity, Totland shuffled back into the doorway and Nathalie tried to make clear to the driver the address

Fru Totland stammered out. She had taken a room at a midwife's up in Romerike. Between Hauersæter and Dal, yes, nodded the driver, he knew where it was.

So they drove off, and Fru Totland began to weep quietly. "I expect you think it's odd of me to have told you wrong. But you see, I was thinking I'd have the whole of my holiday left after it was born. Then I could be with it in peace and quietness for those three months anyway. I've always wished so much that I could have another child to take the place of little Gunnar. For you've no idea how I've missed him——"

"I understand that well enough. When once this is over," said Nathalie consolingly, "I think you'll be perfectly happy."

"That's why I want to stay in the country, you understand—to have my child with me in peace and quiet, at any rate for a *time*. For I don't know what's going to happen when I come home with it." She wept again. "I'm in such despair, Fru Nordgaard, I can't tell you how it is, Tobben's so wild about it. He was dead against my having it—that was what made him give up his job in the travel agency, where he might easily have stayed on, but when I refused to do anything about it, he threw it up in a temper. He won't share me with *any one*, you understand, I must just live for him——"

"Hush, Fru Totland, you mustn't——" Thoroughly miserable and embarrassed, Nathalie tried to find something to say that wouldn't sound too fatuous. "When once the child is there you'll see, perhaps your husband will be just as fond of it as you are. You'll see, it's quite likely that it'll give him a new interest in life," she tried to cheer her.

But Fru Totland sat gazing hopelessly before her.

"He *wasn't* fond of Gunnar—well, I don't mean he was *unkind* to the poor boy, you mustn't think that. But he couldn't bear his screaming or whining the least little bit, and then he was so jealous because it took up so much of my time looking after him——"

They were driving through forest. Fru Totland moaned and made faces every time the car gave a jolt on the worn road, and clutched Nathalie's hand tightly. Every moment the windows were splashed with muddy water, and outside the fog was dense. It was a fine sight, the firs glistening green and the bare twigs of the other trees sparkling with moisture. Among them the brown bracken curled and straggled on the swelling mossy ground.

"——You see, he suffers so from neurasthenia! So one can't blame him at all," said Fru Totland with animation. "Poor Tobben, he can't help being like that, and then he's so terribly fond of me that he's quite *beside* himself at the bare *thought* of my having any other interests than his, you understand. So it's a complex he's got and he's not the least to blame for that. You see, he never had a mother's affection—shocking! His mother was one of those women of the world, you see—no warmth or affection to be had from her, no, never! Quite the contrary, she was always trying to harden him, both physically and psychically, and that's what's made him like this, quite pathological, you understand. That's why he clings so to me—'you're the only one who's shown me a little motherliness,' he always says. For I'm so terribly fond of him—— But all these months that I've been like this—oh, I can assure you I've had a cruel time! I can tell you, sometimes I've nearly lost patience with him—I felt I couldn't put up with him, but I'd made up

my mind I *would* have this child, now that I was like this——"

Nathalie squeezed the desperate hand that clung to hers. "It may turn out much better than you think, Fru Totland," she said in a faint-hearted attempt at consolation.

Fru Totland hung on to the strap by the window. "O God, O God, how dreadful it is! I'd forgotten what it was like, but when it starts it all comes back to one—oh, I'm so afraid, Fru Nordgaard!"

Nathalie was overjoyed when at last they arrived—she had been half afraid the child would come into the world in the car.

It looked a pleasant place—a new villa, fairly secluded, on a hillock above a little lake. And the midwife made a good impression; she was unmarried, in the forties, seemed to have no nonsense about her.

Fru Totland sat in an American rocking-chair by the window while Fröken Vaalengen, the midwife, went in and out and laid the the table—Nathalie was to have coffee before driving back.

"There were such a lot of swallows when I came here to engage the room," said Fru Totland in a melancholy voice. "They must have gone now—but I've never seen such a lot of swallows in my life. The whole air was full of them, and it was so pretty to see them flying and crossing one another——"

Through the fog there were glimpses of dark woods on the other side of the little lake and of withered reeds on its border. The little newly-planted garden outside the window looked untidy in the wet weather, but there were some snowberry shrubs with pearl-like berries.

"It won't come on in earnest before to-night," said

Fröken Vaalengen. "Is it a sister perhaps?" She regarded Nathalie with benevolent respect—that new brown tweed coat and skirt was very smart.

"Only a friend. We're in the same office," Nathalie explained.

"Well, if it should be sooner than I think, I could ring you up if you like——"

"Many thanks, that's very kind. But I haven't a private telephone where I'm living now."

"But isn't there some place she could ring up?" Fru Totland broke in. "In case anything should go wrong—oh, promise me you'll come up if I should be going to die, so that I may see you first, Fru Nordgaard—promise me you'll look after the child, if it should live and I should die."

Nathalie reflected. She had no desire to make the acquaintance of the two business men who lived on the floor below. So she gave Sverre's telephone number.

"Architect Reistad," Fru Totland explained to the midwife.

Well, dash it all—no doubt she was engaged to him in a way, so it didn't matter much if it was public property. "Then I'll ask to have the message sent up to me."

The telephone message reached her next morning at the office. Fru Totland has just given birth to a big healthy boy. It had all gone off very well, the news was nothing but good. Nathalie had to promise to go up there next day; that was Saturday.

"Then you can let me drive you," said Sverre; she said she would certainly be too tired to go out with him in the evening.

The weather was fine when they reached Romerike.

The fog was not nearly so dense as two days before and there was a strange violet light in it. The sky hung low over the low hills, and the great plains seemed infinite.

If she could have a child by him, thought Nathalie; she was sitting in front by Sverre's side looking out on the muddy road which the car was devouring. Such things had been known. Then she could come to feel at home with him. His aquarium and his rare cactuses, and the winter garden he talked of building—it might be possible to be married to all that, even to interest oneself in it. At present she shuddered at the thought of perhaps having to spend every day of her life among it all. But then, even from her point of view, there would be a meaning in these hobbies of his which she guessed he had taken up because they formed a sort of bulwark against something in his nature—what he, and she too, called the gipsy blood in him. If they had a child.

It was almost dark when they arrived, and Fru Totland looked in good fettle as she lay in the subdued light of the little lamp beside the bed. Only her hair hung straggling over her face, the waves had gone out of it.

"She's just going to give him a bath," she said cheerfully. "Then you'll be able to see him properly. He's *so* strong and healthy, Fröken Vaalengen says. Oh, I'm so happy, Fru Nordgaard!

"——Totland has been so kind and nice—he was here yesterday and to-day too. Oh, I'm so sorry for all I said about him the other day, you know he's so neurasthenic that one can't pay attention to all he says. He's really awfully fond of me in his own way, I believe what he was most afraid of was that it'll be too much for me to have a child to look after as well. But now I think he's quite proud of his little boy all the same——"

Fröken Vaalengen had unwrapped the little dark-red body. Nathalie had not often seen them so soon after birth, and every time it gave her a little shock—that there was something so *internal* about a perfectly new-born human child. It is still so much a part of another woman's entrails that there is something nasty, or indecent, about it to one who is not of the same flesh and blood. And yet it is quite miraculously charming at the same time—the tiny perfect human hands, and the feet, quite round in the soles because they have not yet touched the ground, with toes like a wreath of delightful little cranberries. To her who has given birth out of her body to a little human seed like this—oh, it must be an utterly inconceivable happiness to see and touch one's own new-born child just while it is still wrinkled and creased from the womb like an expanding flower from the bud it has burst. To the father, in so far as he retains the smallest remnant of the Old Testament male instinct which desires to see fruit coming up from its seed—to the elders of a family who witness the renewal of life in the persons of their children, while in themselves they are aware of nothing but the slow decay of the body——

Alfhild Totland chattered on and on. When Fröken Vaalengen gave her the baby she seemed to sink into herself for a moment, in deep animal peace. Her light brown eyes took on an expression of vigilance and security at the same time—like the eyes of a dog when spoken to kindly by someone it is fond of. But almost at once she began to chatter again, excitedly and without ceasing.

"No, Fru Totland, I'm only afraid I've been here too long already. I'm sure you must want rest."

"——And remember me to them all! Fancy, Magnus

wanted to come too—I'm so touched, as I've often been so angry with him lately, but he is so careless when he's taking copies—and give them all many thanks for the cake. And many thanks for all the lovely things for Baby, and for everything.

"You *must* come again soon, Fru Nordgaard. Oh, do—it *is* a long way to come, but I'm so terribly alone in the world, you know, I haven't anybody belonging to me, except Tobben, I mean——" And then she began to cry again. From pure embarrassment at not being able to find anything to say Nathalie bent down and kissed her hurriedly on the cheek.

"Ah, poor woman," said Sverre as they drove away. "In spite of all, I'm sure your mother has always overrated the male sex. As the domineering, but noble and active half of mankind—your father in other words. Ah, dear me, yes."

Sigurd, thought Nathalie. When he sees his own child, that is the time when I shall finally fade out of his mind into the realm of shades.

CHAPTER FIVE

AUTUMN went by, one day like another. Nathalie had grown accustomed to Sverre, so she thought herself. She never made any objection when he talked as if he took it for granted they were to be married as soon as the legal period of separation allowed it.

She was not overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the idea. But then she was no longer very young, she could hardly screw herself up to expect the full glory of life in company with *any one*. And then she was used to being her own mistress. It was no doubt the same with Sverre —presumably he never reflected about this when he decided everything for them both as though it were a matter of course. It simply did not occur to him that she too was accustomed to settle her own affairs. He had sold Stranna, he told her one day, "as I've been able to spend so little time there of late years. And I took it for granted you didn't care to go out there again." That was true, but he might have spoken to her about it first. Now he was going to find another place for the summer. The only question was where—a cottage near town which they could use all the year round, or a house by the sea in their home country.

"That's all right," said Nathalie. "But don't decide on anything without telling me, if you don't mind. That is, if you intend me to live there too."

He felt the snub: "No, of course I won't do that. Do

you think me so self-willed then?" he asked, with a curiously innocent air.

"Self-willed——" She laughed. "At any rate you seem to think it's more blessed to give advice than to receive it."

Sverre looked at her in astonishment—then he laughed too. "I'll have to see if I can cure myself."

It did not mean very much after all, she thought. But in Sigurd she had always had the most unlimited confidence. He had failed her as completely as could be. But all the same her feeling for him—especially when she was not actually thinking of him but merely sensed their married life as a background for her present life—was still that Sigurd was a man on whom one could absolutely depend, a man in whom was no guile. Sverre had never failed her. And she guessed that there was essential truth in his assertion that he had always been in love with her, even before they were grown up. It was really a kind of constant love, even if a good deal of it had been a fanciful vision, "I and Nathalie"—the kind of love that is more often found in books than in real life. Though perhaps it does occur oftener in life than in books, if we take into account that a love of this kind may persist in a person's life like an underground stream, unaffected by any other affairs in which that person may become involved. She had not the ghost of a reason for distrusting Sverre. But she did not rely on him. Quite the reverse.

Perhaps the real cause of it was to be found in something physical. Not that she wasn't pleased with him as a lover, for she was—at times more than she cared to recall afterwards. It was this inexplicable dread of hers that he might become a habit of which she could not break herself. Though to be sure there was not much sense in

being afraid of this when she had made up her mind to marry him; and she had done this, though she had not told him so outright. Something to do with the hormones perhaps—about which one knows too little. The vital rhythm, which Sverre talked about. Singing together, ringing together, one of mamma's lady novelists had called it in old days. At that time she had thought it the most arrant twaddle. But perhaps the lady had stumbled on a truth here, though she expressed it in such an affected way.

Sverre Reistad talked about what they were to do at Christmas, but Nathalie explained that she had already taken too much time away from the office this year. And as Fru Totland had leave of absence she had more work than usual in stocktaking and getting out the balance-sheet. She positively disliked travelling about with him in this way, but he did not seem to have any idea of that. For one thing, she did not like taking precautions to conceal their relations—but as for openly going about with Sverre as man and wife—no, that might well wait until they were actually married.

As a rule she only glanced at the papers before leaving home in the morning; she took them in her case and read them at lunch. So it was in the Grand Café, while waiting for Hildur who was to meet her there, that she saw the announcement:

Our dear daughter
Anne Randine
died to-day, leaving her little daughter and us.
Sissel Gaarder *née* Aasen. Halvor N. Gaarder.

At first she only felt she was struck dumb—it was like the physical sensation one has after a terrific, deafening crash. But she was afraid at the same time—afraid of all the thoughts which would crowd on her when she really understood that Adinda Gaarder was really dead. All the thoughts of Sigurd that had filled her mind since she lost him—how he would feel at home again among his own people, would be disappointed, bored perhaps with the other one and would perhaps look back at times with regret to *their* life together—all these fancies of hers were now dissolved into nothing——

A dream, he himself had likened this new love of his to a dream, and now he must have waked from it. Although, there must already have been an awakening when she and he parted company—and when he was forced to disclose the whole story to her. Or perhaps he had been waked from his dream as soon as he discovered that it was to have consequences. Poor man, he had doubtless had a number of awakenings, and fairly brutal ones too. But now it was absolutely at an end. She was dead, the fair girl with the youthful eyelids and the child's hair—— It was a thousand pities of her too, but——

But it is worse still for us who have not even our youth. He had *not* done with me, far from it—even if he had allowed himself to drift into this adventure with a young one. And I—well to be sure, all these thoughts I have had of Sigurd, these attempts to picture to myself how he was living now, and what sort of life he would have in the future—these have really been of more importance to me than the plans I have tried to make for my own future, with Sverre.

It was unjust of her, she knew it herself, to feel so exasperated with Sverre at this moment. *He* could not

know—though God only knew what he did know. It must have been just this that had made her feel so insecure in her relations with Sverre: she did not know how much he guessed or thought. Perhaps he spoke nothing but the truth, his crafty calculations only existed in her own guilty conscience which made him so impenetrable to her vision.

——Hildur's youngest girl came wandering among the tables, looking for her. She brought a message that her mother had been prevented. No doubt the little girl would have liked to be asked to lunch with Aunt Thali, but Nathalie made no sign. She was not equal to it. She was only too glad not to have Hildur's company now.

The moment she entered her hall-door that evening she caught the smell of Sverre's tobacco. It gave her a shock of despairing impatience.

He jumped up from his chair as she came in—he had been reading. The converted moderator lamps with embroidered shades of old tulle gave such a pleasant light, lending a variety of tints to the plush furniture—from aquamarine with a silvery cast where the nap had been pressed flat, to a dark green in the shadows which reminded one of a pine forest. Oh, he ought to have been a designer of interiors, she thought with irritation—Sverre was incessantly changing her things about and bringing her something new which made it necessary to arrange the whole room over again. Till he had made her sitting-room quite charming and at the same time a perfect imitation of an interior of the Björnson and Ibsen period—a scene for *Ghosts*. She had almost yielded to the enchantment of its amiable, unpretentious comfort—

and now she was seized with a kind of panicky fury with this box that Sverre had prepared to shut her up in.

"Tired?" he asked. "Thought you might be. I've been tidying up for you in case." The click of the switch as he turned on the light by the dinner-table got on her nerves. "I had an idea you wouldn't care to go anywhere to-night. Just before Christmas is always a busy time with you, I know."

"Oh, in our place we don't notice the Christmas rush enough to hurt."

When all was said and done perhaps he had no secret motive—he only meant to be attentive because he loved her. As Sigurd would have tried to be—but she never gave him a chance, for then there was love on her side and she wanted to be the attentive one——

"*Dans l'amour il y a toujours un qui baise et un qui tend la joue.*" She had said it aloud without thinking—it was one of Aunt Nanna's quotations which she tried to remember.

Sverre put his arms round her, bent her head to one side and kissed her so hard that it hurt the sinews of her neck.

"No—don't do that!" She had tears in her eyes—from mere nervousness. He had also seen the announcement, she was sure of that.

They had tea—wore through a whole hour without saying a word about what was in both their thoughts. But at last Nathalie could hold out no longer:

"Did you see that she is dead—Sigurd's new sweetheart?"

He nodded. "A pity, she was a nice girl. Sorry for the parents too—she was their only child."

As Nathalie said nothing he went on:

"I'm sorry for the Gaarders. I noticed they didn't word the announcement in the usual Catholic way, with R.I.P. and a notice about the Requiem Mass and so on. I suppose that means she died impenitent, poor child."

"Impenitent—how do you mean?"

"Probably she considered herself engaged to him. Or something of that sort."

"The only time I had a talk with her," said Nathalie thoughtfully, "she assured me solemnly that she would never marry a divorced man. But then that was before our separation."

"She may have changed her mind. When she found out that he would really be free to marry her after all."

"So the child is alive," said Nathalie in a low voice.

"So it seems, yes."

"I wonder what Sigurd will do now." She *had* to say it.

"You mean what *you* will do!" His voice was so sharp and strange that it made her start.

"I! I don't see that *I* can do anything——"

"Well, thank God you see *that* anyhow!" He breathed freely.

But she could not help talking about it. After a while she said:

"What in the world put it into your head that *I* should do anything now?"

Sverre Reistad went over and sat at the little cottage piano that he had sent here. It was part of the furniture that he had taken over from Henriette Damm when she married. He opened it, but sat still and did not touch the keys. She looked at his bent head. On the crown the skull was beginning to show through the hair.

"You had a letter from him the other day, I saw?"

"About the apartment. We're getting it sold now."

"Did he write anything about what you were talking of?"

"He never writes about anything but purely practical matters. I've had two or three letters of that sort from him since he left town." But he had never been much of a letter-writer—and how she had loved his awkward business-like notes, with a few clumsy sentences at the end which only she knew how to construe as a long love letter.

Sverre twirled round on the music-stool and came back to her. He stood over her, so tall and so dark—he was like a shadow, he was like a wall, like anything that stands in the way and prevents one from going where one will——

"Nathalie!" He stopped, as though he had to collect and control himself. "You mustn't go and do anything silly now."

"Silly, what do you mean?—I suppose it's you and I now," she said in a challenging tone.

"That was the idea, yes." He sat down on the edge of her writing-table—as he often sat on his own desk in his office.

"It looks as if you didn't place any excessive reliance on me," said Nathalie as before.

"Oh yes, I do. But that doesn't make me feel too sure you won't give me the slip again." And now he showed that crooked, melancholy smile that she remembered from their schooldays. "You know what they used to say about people who'd been carried off by the fairies in old days? At first they got restive at every brook they had to cross, they wanted to go back to the fairy mountain."

Nathalie smiled faintly. "You have to give everything

a romantic turn. Then is Sigurd supposed to be a kind of fairy king?"

"No, I should say not. But he's been one for you, for let me tell you, it's you who are romantic. That you and I could really make a pair *in time*, of that I am sure. But I know very well that at the moment your feeling for me is no more than so-so. But I'm so fond of you that I'm sure—— To put it bluntly, Nathalie—both of us will soon reach the age when we shall change whether we like it or not, nature will see to that. And then it's natural that one should return to the convictions with which one started—excuse the expression, I know you don't like it, but it is so. It's all nonsense that birds of a feather flock together; when one is past a certain age one is best suited with someone who shares one's —well, damn it, one's convictions. And who is fond of one for what one is in oneself. Sigurd was gone on you because you were something new in his experience, something strange he had discovered. I am fond of you precisely as you are in yourself. You may remember that there was no fun in being carried off by the fairies except for the very young."

Nathalie sat with her hands in her lap—weary with sadness. All that he said sounded so true. No doubt it *was* true, only not for her.

"I told you before, I quite understood your falling in love with him. But lately, Nathalie, looking back on it all you must feel yourself how spasmodic were your attempts to persuade yourself that the relations between you were still in order. Naturally I can imagine that you often spoke without reflecting *what* you said. But to put it plainly, you did things in your desperation which were simply unworthy of you——"

"Of course I did," she said wearily. "What do you

know about it though?" she asked suddenly. "What is it you're thinking of——?"

"For instance when you gave your sister-in-law the impression that it might just as well have been I who had been on too friendly terms with Fröken Gaarder——"

"But are you quite insane——!"

"Sonja Nordgaard has been spreading it about among our acquaintance that you told her there was a kind of engagement or something of the sort between Fröken Gaarder and me. Though as a matter of fact I scarcely knew her."

"I never said so!" She tried to remember. "You said something one day in the summer, I was supposed to have told Sonja something like this. I don't remember now what it was. Sigurd was going out one evening last spring—he said there was a party, and you were to be there, and a Doctor Gaarder and some other Gaarders from town. I dare say I said something about it to Sonja; she looked in the same evening."

"And Sonja naturally knew as well as everybody else that Doctor Gaarder was a famous Norwegian baby-butcher, at any rate while he was practising here in town. So she drew her own conclusions."

"And you believe I did that so that she——?"

His face turned suddenly dark red.

"I haven't said that——"

"You who imagine you know me better than any one else——"

"I didn't mean it in that way——"

"What did you mean then?"

"One may be led into saying so many things. You too, I suppose. To shield someone you are fond of I dare say you could say things without thinking that others might

interpret them worse than they were meant. Especially when the other is a woman like Sonja, an irresponsible little chatterbox——"

"No. No, Sverre. You'd better go now. This story that you make out I'd invented, there's a little too much of the artful gipsy about it, let me tell you. It's no use our discussing it—you'd better go——"

"Nathalie——" As he came a step nearer she stamped on the floor. "Leave me alone! This is so vile that I don't know what—— Can't you go—before you torture me to death——"

But as he turned to the door she cried after him:

"Is this a thing that Sonja's been broadcasting? Of course Sigurd's heard it too——?"

"Yes, I don't understand how you could be so incautious in talking to her. You must understand this, Nathalie, if you're ever so angry with me, and I don't say you haven't reason to be; it's true I ought to have known you better than to have believed for a moment that you said such a thing designedly. But I too have felt it viler than I can tell you—being mixed up in this affair in such a way. I certainly haven't been a Joseph. But this kind of thing was never in my line."

"No, I understand that." She collapsed altogether from wretchedness. "It's loathsome for you too. And the young girl—who is dead now!"

"Yes, that's the worst."

"Oh, if only it had been me! No—no, don't touch me, please—you'd better go—— Yes, that's the only thing you can do for me now—go, so that I may be alone, for I can't bear any more. I'm going to bed now, I have something I can take——"

"Good heavens, Nathalie——"

"No, no, no," she laughed hysterically.

But after this of course he did not give in. "I won't touch you, if you don't wish it. But you can let me give you the powder, then I shall know how much you're taking."

If only it had been me, if only it had been me, the words kept ringing within her as she undressed. And she thought she meant it.

But when she had got into bed she called to Sverre, and she allowed him to give her the sleeping-draught. He tidied up the room after her, opened the window a little way, switched off the ceiling light and spread a silk handkerchief over the bedside lamp. There was something grateful in being looked after like this. And as she began to doze off it was reassuring to see the crack of light at the sitting-room door and to know that he was there——

BOOK THREE

CHAPTER ONE

AT the entrance to the show ground the water formed regular lakes, from which a stream ran down each side of the road. The clouds rolled apart at that moment and a flood of sunshine made the last patches of snow gleam like silver over the fields, while the withered grass turned golden and the clumps of spruce shone green, as though freshly washed after the winter. Some windows on the hillside caught the full sunlight and reflected a dazzling glare. It lasted but a little while, then the clouds, blue-grey and gleaming white, were massed together again; the snatch of sunshine swept over the top of the ridge, stayed there a moment, and was gone.

Nathalie had bought a catalogue. She took long strides to keep her feet as dry as could be managed. In a thaw like this her white woollen sports dress was not very suitable; she had put it on all the same, as it was much prettier than the brown, but it had been horribly splashed on the way here.

A perfectly hellish din came from the old red-painted sheds around the show ground—dogs yelping and barking and harriers baying in a deafening roar. Nathalie found the grey deerhounds. It was number fourteen—Markusragga.

The bitch lay flat on the ground at the far end of the box. With her handsome dark head on her fore-paws

she kept a vigilant eye on four month-old puppies which were rolling about in play, and on the human strangers who stopped outside the netting and spoke to them.

She had only been given the third prize. Nathalie read the slip attached to the woodwork. "Breeder: M. Tangen, Aashygda"—that must be Markus, of course, his first cousin. So he had bought this one——

Nathalie took a turn through the show—stopped to look at a magnificent specimen—first prize in the champion class. Half-turned towards the ground she kept an eye on the people strolling round.

He was coming here to look at some harriers; she had heard it quite accidentally last evening at the hotel—some men at the next table had been talking about the show. Now she felt all at once, what a silly idea to come out here. Why couldn't she just as well have looked in at the shop and asked for him? Instead of rushing out here to meet him casually——

Surely one ought not to be so shy of one's divorced husband in these days. But the fact was that the last time she met him, in the Stockholm train, she was travelling to meet Sverre; it was while their unhappy engagement still lingered on. So she had felt under no little constraint in talking to Sigurd. And she was not sorry when it turned out he was going no farther than Arvika. She had been afraid Sverre might see them travelling by the same train. Then he would have believed that her meeting with Sigurd had given her the impulse to act as she had already made up her mind to act.

But then after that—every time she had seen his name on the green glass sign and the two windows with their display of radio sets and lamps and electric stoves, as she drove along Main Street—she had not been able to screw

herself up and go in and speak to him. She might easily have found a pretext—pretended she wanted his advice about something, but no—— Once or twice she had caught a glimpse of him too. One time he was riding past on a motor bicycle, so he could not have seen her. The last time was six weeks ago. She was in the hall of the hotel and suddenly saw him standing outside the entrance talking to another man. She guessed that the other wanted to bring him in. So she fled upstairs, and on hearing his voice below she ordered tea in her room, dreading to meet him in the dining-room. And now here she was patrolling in all this noise, pretending to inspect sporting dogs of every possible breed with the interest of a connoisseur—and hoping to meet him. It was so silly that it was high time the Guardian of all fools took charge of the matter.

They seemed to be judging by one of the sheds, but it was an English setter they had before them——

——At that moment he almost ran into her——

"Good day, Sigurd!"

"Good day——" He looked utterly astonished. "Are *you* in these parts? I must say I never expected to find you here!"

She felt unreasonably disappointed. After all, she had expected him to know how often she had been here during the last year. In these little towns everything gets about——

"I've been up to visit Alfhild Totland. She's in hospital at Björkli—but perhaps you know that—she's been there over a year."

"No, I didn't know it. Poor woman. How is she?"

"Oh, it's a pretty bad case. They've tried operating and everything, but the results have been nothing to

boast of. Her mother died of it and both her brothers. So I've been up to see her from time to time. I dare say you remember, she has no relations, at any rate not in this part of the country, and I don't think she knows many people in Oslo; her husband monopolized her almost entirely."

"Ah, poor thing. I remember her well. Nice-looking woman when she first came to you. She had a little boy whom she lost?"

"Yes—and she had another afterwards who's alive."

"Ah, that was sad. And you, how are you getting on?"

"Quite well, thanks. And you?"

"Oh, all right. Will you excuse me a moment?" There was a man obviously waiting for Sigurd. "I should like so much to have a chat—if you have no objection?"

"Dear me, no. I'll walk up and down in the meantime. There are lots of nice animals here. You have a dog too, I see?"

Sigurd disappeared with the man. He looked well—had grown much thinner and had an open-air tan on his face. His hair seemed to have turned rather grey, but it was so fair that it did not show much.

——It occurred to her suddenly—is there any one he is interested in——? How do I know—he may very well be engaged for all I know. He's still a good-looking man, and his business is getting on quite well, they say, though it's nothing brilliant. People like him, are quite ready to associate with him. And these little places are always crawling with girls, young and old. Besides, this is a place where numbers of widows and divorced wives settle down. It would be almost a strange thing if Sigurd had gone free. And after all why should he, since he *is* free——?

She turned a corner and saw him. He and the other man were by his dog, looking at the puppies probably——

What Asmund was talking about so scornfully when last she met him—that Sigurd had turned religious—would certainly not stand in the way. As far as Nathalie knew, people of that sort were rather inclined to go in for friendships that bordered on the erotic, between zealous individuals of opposite sexes.

The stranger went away, and Nathalie strolled up. Sigurd was busy inside with the dogs.

"Handsome animal," she remarked for the sake of saying something. The bitch *was* handsome though, as she thrust her black muzzle into Sigurd's hand.

"Yes—I was in hopes she would do better. But she wasn't in her best form, poor girl. The puppies here are fine—the sire's a first prize in the champion class—he's not in the show, he's getting old——"

"Is he yours too?"

"No, he belongs to a lady in the town here."

Nathalie felt a stab of suspicion of this lady with the dog.

"It's nice for you to be able to keep a dog again." He had had a harrier when they were married. But when he got his appointment with the company he had to part with it—he could not take it to the office, and it could not be left alone in the flat, or allowed to run about the streets all day either.

"Oh yes. But now I've had her boarded out for a bit. One can't very well have puppies in the house when there are little children, you know. And I brought my little girl to live with me some time ago."

They walked side by side towards the exit without saying anything.

"Then you haven't a—bachelor establishment?" asked Nathalie tamely.

"No, I have an elderly person from up the valley who keeps house for us. An excellent woman, but she spoils the child fearfully. So now I have my meals at home and all."

"She's three and a half now——? A sweet little thing?"

"You may be sure I think so," he said with a rapid smile.

"What's her name?" Nathalie asked, as though reluctantly.

"Anne Sissel."

——But of course she's called Anne, thought Nathalie.

"Perhaps you're staying here a few days?" he asked.

"No, I have to go back this afternoon."

"Well, I suppose you can't spare any more time just now. Are you going back to the town, if so I can give you a lift? That is, if you'd like——"

"Yes, thanks. I walked out here, as the weather was so fine, but your roads are awful——"

It was a ramshackle old Chevrolet, and it splashed up water and mud as it bumped along.

So here she was sitting by his side, utterly unable to find anything more to talk about. Now she was feeling ashamed of herself—why had she foisted herself in on him in this way? Because in all these years she had thought of him continually, more or less distinctly, but he had always been somewhere in her thoughts. Well, her sitting here did not seem to disturb *him*—had she noticed that it did so she would have had none of this sense of shame.

He inquired after her mother. And Nikolai. And her sisters.

"Gerda thinks of coming home for a trip this summer."

"She's been in Norway fairly often these last few years, hasn't she? I met her in Oslo two years ago."

Gerda had not said a word about this. Again Nathalie tried to listen to reason—one ought to cure oneself of looking for something significant in all that related to one's own person. As a rule it signifies nothing. Gerda and he may have met in the street and exchanged a few words; Gerda didn't think it worth mentioning. Gerda and I had so little to say to one another that time; Kai was at the point of death, Sverre had just died. When one is unhappy through thinking one has suffered wrong one is apt to talk and talk about it till doomsday; when one is unhappy through knowing one has done wrong it is easy to keep one's mouth shut.

They had now reached the town: "You want to go to the hotel——?"

"Yes, please. Perhaps you're going back to work?"

He laughed: "I've got to leave the car, but then I'm going home to dinner. I dine at one o'clock now."

"Do you though? Well, after all there's no great difference, lunch or dinner."

He had stopped outside the hotel. They stood there, and neither of them quite knew how to say good-bye.

"If I only knew what she's got. But I'm not at all sure if I may——? Otherwise I'd have asked if you'd come home to my place." His embarrassment was so obvious that it delighted her.

"But I can come along and see what you have," she suggested gaily. "You can guess I'd like to see what your house is like," she added more calmly. And quite seriously: "I should be glad to see your little girl, if you'll let me."

He too was serious now. And she took her seat again by his side.

There was an extensive yard behind the house in which he had his shop—long low sheds and timber out-houses; she caught a smell of stables; a little concrete workshop. Over by the fence stood some old poplars with their resinous buds shining against the sky.

"My fitter's going to use the car," Sigurd explained as he came back; "so we'll have to walk. But it's a bit of a way——"

"It's such lovely weather though." The sunshine was continually breaking out anew from one point or another of the stormy blue-grey sky. The yard sloped uphill and water ran down it in little streams which swept rubbish and horse-dung into heaps, tempting an old provincial to kick them away and release the water with its chinking bits of ice.

"In Oslo I suppose everything is much farther advanced than here?" They passed through a gate in the fence and came out into a back street with wooden houses painted in bright colours behind white garden palings. But the pine-woods were just behind the houses and almost reached into the town.

Sigurd turned off into a side road. Little brand-new villas had been built over an old meadow, and tall birches were left here and there in the little gardens among newly planted fruit-trees and young shrubs.

"This is where I live." They both stopped. The house was cream-coloured and square, no doubt meant to be "functionalist." It was cosily situated in a corner among old trees, and inside the gate a little girl was busy with a snow mound, so all that was seen of her was the back of

her sky-blue panties and a pair of straddling stumps; she was dressed in blue knitting.

"Hullo, Anne!" As he called out she looked up for a moment, then turned her round red face away and went on making her snow mound.

Sigurd stood at the gate: "Aren't you coming to say how-d'ye-do? You must come and say how-d'ye-do nicely, you know. Come along now——" This made not the slightest impression on the child, and he smiled apologetically at Nathalie: "She's rather shy."

At that moment she came, and she didn't look the least shy, as she stood wiping her wet hands on the front of her guernsey and scrutinizing her father and the strange lady.

She was just the sort to make everyone say, "oh, what a lovely child!" She had dropped her cap and her yellow hair was plastered against her stubborn round noddle in great rings darkened by moisture. The round face was burning and the sharp spring air had chapped her cheeks and nostrils. She's not really pretty, thought Nathalie—the greedy look you see in so many little children was unusually marked in her. Until they reach the age of at least four or five the facial conformation of most little children reminds one of primitive savage races: the rounded forehead is hard and bulging and the thick little nose is flat and indented at the root, the rapacious mouth is out of proportion to the weak chin. One makes allowance for this in saying a child is pretty—remembering that its face is unfinished, plump and chubby so that time may have material to work upon, with a little muzzle that has no great resemblance to a grown-up person's nose and mouth.

She stood looking up at Nathalie, and her big blue eyes were just the colour of her knitted suit—they had an

air of vigilant hostility. No mutual sympathy at first sight, thought Nathalie, and aloud she said: "How splendidly well she looks. And sweet"—this in a slightly lower tone, but loud enough for the little enemy to hear it and be a trifle appeased.

She took not the slightest notice of her father's injunction—"Now give the lady your hand, Anne, nicely—so we can see that you *can*." Anne didn't give her hand either nicely or otherwise. But all of a sudden she did hold out her hand to Nathalie—it was cold as ice and wet with snow—and the next moment she was fingering the clasp of her handbag, a flower in yellow cut glass.

"Oh, does this come open—let's see!"

"You must wait till we come in anyhow." Nathalie smiled.

"Is she to come in with us?" asked Anne with a frown.

"That was the idea, yes." Sigurd laughed.

The child trotted on in front towards the house; she took care to tread in all the puddles and splashed water at every step. She was already on the stairs when they came into the hall—planting one foot on the stair and dragging the other after; her sky-blue behind was broad and discouraging.

The room Sigurd showed her into was not very large but bright—seemed even brighter through being so sparsely furnished. He had the old chest of drawers from their home, and the blue corner-cupboard with paintings on the door-panels of fantastic buildings and trees and hunters in rococo costumes—well, he had every right to keep them, he had inherited them from an uncle. There was not much else except some steel-tube chairs and the table in the middle. The blue flowered wax-cloth was laid for two and a child.

"We're to have sweet soup and rissoles, Fröken Nordskriden says—nothing you like, I'm afraid."

"Dear me, yes," she said stupidly. Sweet soup and rissoles, it reminded her of her first years in Oslo, when she was living as a bachelor girl in a bed-sitting-room. Those were the standing dishes at the places she went to for meals.

"Let's see it now," said Anne, reaching for Nathalie's handbag. They had taken off her outdoor clothes. She looked nicer like this, with her little pink throat open and bare round arms. She was not the least like Sigurd, probably took after her mother, but was quite different all the same. She was no doubt what is usually called a pretty child, fair and robust, but she did not look as if she would be so pretty as she grew older.

Sigurd was conferring with Fröken Nordskriden. She usually took her meals in the dining-room, Nathalie guessed, but to-day as there was a visitor, she would take her dinner in the kitchen, and give Anne her food there too. They addressed each other familiarly—well, there was nothing in that, they were both country folk. She was dark and straight and nice-looking—probably about fifty, a fine figure of a woman.

"I don't know if Fru Nordgaard remembers me," she said, noticing that Nathalie was looking at her. "I've been supplying towels to House and Home for many years now—I was in and spoke to you one time I was in town—Kari Nordskriden."

"Yes, of course, I remember you well. But that's a good while ago now; have you given up weaving, Fröken Nordskriden?"

Her brother got married, she explained, and so it was that she left and took a place.

Anne started to cough and spit and make faces. She had opened Nathalie's cigarette-case and sucked at a cigarette till it was a sodden mess. Sigurd and Fröken Nordskriden dried her mouth and gave her a mild scolding, while Nathalie collected the contents of her handbag, which the child had scattered over the chairs. And then they could sit down to dinner.

"I used to take my meals at the hotel, you see, so it's all rather primitive here," Sigurd apologized. "I haven't provided much linen and so on yet. It wasn't until I got her here that I had to set up housekeeping." He went on in English: "She was with her grandparents, you see, but then her grandfather died a year ago and her grandmother now in January. So she has been with me only four months——"

"No, no, what's that talk, Sigurd!" screamed the child, and then she burst out laughing.

"Grown-ups talk like that sometimes, when it's things that children don't have to hear."

"Do it again—you're so funny when you talk like that."

"It's extraordinary how forward she is," remarked Nathalie cautiously. Frightfully spoilt, she thought—Knut is much, much nicer, prettier too. And she was impelled to tell him: "I've had Fru Totland's little boy staying with me this winter; he's about the same age as this one."

"Have you? Well, then I dare say you know they're rather troublesome. Are you still living at the same place——?"

"Yes. It's been scheduled for pulling down ever so long, but it doesn't look as if it will come to that at present. But of course you don't know where it is, it's such a blind alley——"

"I passed it one day last year."

Anne banged her spoon down into the plate with all her might, splashing the soup in all directions. She evidently thought the grown-ups had been talking along enough without taking notice of her. "Oh but Anne, how naughty you are—you'd better go out to the kitchen and have your dinner there. I'll get some hot water; I dare say that'll take it off, if it's done at once," he said to Nathalie. The child had made a fearful mess of her white silk blouse and homespun skirt.

It was evidently Fröken Nordskriden's room she was shown into. Over the child's cot in the corner hung some religious pictures and a photograph of Adinda Gaarder. The housekeeper brought hot water and a towel. A moment later Sigurd came to the door:

"How is it going? I'm awfully ashamed—very awkward her behaving like this. She's not accustomed to visitors. Ah, now I come to think of it, I was always finding fault with Asmund's youngsters. But indeed it's not so easy to get them into shape——

"——You do your hair differently now, don't you?" he asked.

Nathalie shook her head:

"I've given up dyeing it—perhaps that's what makes it look strange." She saw her face in the glass, and the black hair streaked with grey. He came so close that his head appeared behind hers.

"Not strange—rather the reverse. You're more like what you were when I first knew you, now that your hair's dark again. When it was reddish brown it didn't suit you so well."

"It was brown—there was no red in it."

"Wasn't there? I always thought it had a reddish look.

But perhaps it was because your sisters had red hair that I got that impression."

Meanwhile the rissoles were getting cold. Anne was more or less subdued after her late performance; she sulked a little at not being given beer, but subsided fairly soon. There was another row at the end of the meal when Sigurd said she must have on her outdoor things and go and play. But anyhow it ended in Fröken Nordskriden taking the child away.

"Do you think she's shockingly brought up?" he asked with a smile of embarrassment.

"If I were to say no, she's quite well brought up, would you believe I meant it?"

They laughed. "Well, I can't make out what to do—she makes me laugh whenever I try to be strict, and then you know it's all up."

"Stop being strict then. And get properly angry now and again."

Fröken Nordskriden put the coffee on the little smoking-table by the window. "Perhaps you'll pour out," he suggested. "I always make a mess with this coffee-pot." Nathalie poured out the coffee.

"Angry, you say. It's not so easy to be angry with a little one like this, Thali. Especially when one always has the feeling that she has a right to be angry with me."

"If you think in that way," said Nathalie—"if you can never get rid of a sense of guilt—towards your own daughter—why, then it'll be the worse for her in the long run."

He made no answer.

"And in the present state of the world I suppose *all* parents have an equally good reason to beg their children's pardon for having brought them into it. Good

heavens, Sigurd, when you look at all that's going on around us, do you really think it matters so tremendously if this little girl of yours has come into the world in a slightly irregular way?"

"All the same it's another thing when one's guilt is so obvious that one can't avoid being alive to it. Guilty in a general way, as you were saying—of course we are all that. But when there's a concrete case as the starting-point of one's acknowledgment of guilt—and the child is in the very centre of that starting-point——"

"Yes, of course it can't be altogether pleasant for you. If she represents a kind of doorkeeper at the entrance to your acknowledgment of sin, or whatever you call it. But it certainly won't be very pleasant for the child either, if you've assigned this part to her.

"——Naturally she's to be pitied for having no mother. But in any case it's not your fault that her mother died. Had she lived no doubt you'd have been married long ago, and the child would have had a normal home."

"That would hardly have been the course of things. She would not have married me. That was the last I heard from her. I had a letter—it was written five days after little Anne's birth, the day before she died. They found it afterwards and sent it. And she was not one to change her mind."

Nathalie considered a moment.

"I had a talk with her once—but she must have told you about it. She came to see me—I suppose it was the last time she was in Oslo."

"No. I didn't know it. You see, I never met her after she left Mrs. Atlee's house that spring. And during her last few months she didn't write either. Until the end, I mean."

Thank God—then he didn't know how horrid she had been with the poor girl. She had been afraid of this, more than she would admit to herself. Afterwards she had never been able to understand how she could have been so downright cruel to a person who was suffering. Certainly she had guessed that Anne Gaarder was in earnest in saying she would not marry a divorced man—and then she was so young and so obstinate. Yes, she had tried to shake her determination—to get her to act in such a way that she would have been living in a kind of happiness which would have been ceaselessly sapped from within, by pangs of conscience. That must have been what she had in mind, that was the revenge she wished for——

She shuddered slightly, and on seeing that Sigurd looked at her she said quickly:

"So she knew she was going to die, poor thing——?"

"No, on the contrary. I don't think anybody suspected that. She had had severe hæmorrhages, but they thought the danger was quite past. But then there was a relapse, and all they could do was of no use..."

Well, God knows how I imagined this meeting would turn out, Nathalie wondered. Four years—a good deal of water had flowed under the bridges in that time. She could see too that there was a ridiculous side to it. They had parted, each to take up with another—and now Adinda Gaarder was dead, and Sverre Reistad was dead. Had she imagined that, after they had each gone through a decent old-fashioned period of mourning, she could come here and set on foot some kind of preliminaries? And after that they could pick up the thread again where it had been broken? That would indeed be a patching up.

Oh no. Those four years in which they had not been together, they were not to be jumped over in that way.

She had also had an idea of telling him it was all over between Sverre and her before his death. But now she did not feel equal to talking to Sigurd about her affair with Sverre. Whatever mess he had got himself into, he was after all too straight to understand a business like that. Even if he had filled her up with lies that time—it was not a question of a difference of degree, but of an essential difference.

"You understand," he said, when they had been silent so long that she scarcely remembered what he had said last. "When one has shipwrecked another person's life, and then that person—dies. It makes it so irreparable, so irretrievable. I feel sure that *she* would have righted herself again, if she had lived. But then she died. And she is the mother of Anne. Who has now come into my hands. She is *my* child. And I can only say that I've grown very fond of her."

"I quite understand that. But just on that account, Sigurd, you must try—not to bury yourself in ideas which will make the relationship between you and the child altogether unbearable. You are bound to bring her up in one way or another. Perhaps all upbringing is only so-so—and it's hard to know what kind of a world one has to bring one's children up to live in. But all the same you must try to give your child something to which she can hold fast in life. If you're always going to feel—guilty—towards her, then *you* at any rate can never be her holdfast in the world. And I suppose that is what you wish to be?"

"I?" He gave a little laugh. "You must surely be the last person to think that I am fit to be a holdfast in life—for any one. Poor Anne in *that* case."

"Poor Anne if you can't nerve yourself to blot out

what has been. Forget that unhappy business into which you drifted half unintentionally—sufficiently at any rate to regain such self-confidence as will give your child confidence in you."

"Confidence. Well, if you mean that she is to believe I am ready to do anything in my power for her—naturally I wish that. But that I should blot out the foolish and—well, sinful things I have done and contrive for myself a kind of self-confidence in which she can confide—no!"

"So you intend that she shall grow up to look upon you as a kind of loving father and a weak man?"

"But if that is the truth? I take it the first thing I must try to implant in her is a sense of reality. You say the world is in such a state that every one has reason to beg his children's pardon for having brought them into it. But surely that is just the trouble, that none of us *will* remember our own sins. Neither our sins nor those of our forefathers—our forefathers' sins we dress up as something romantic, whether it's the history of a nation or of a class, or merely of our own family. When we discover that we have built our self-confidence on a mere fiction, we make up another story about what we were like in the Viking Age, or about the Germanic race in the Bronze Age, or about the type of humanity they are going to breed in Russia or Germany or Rome, if only they have the power and keep it long enough. So we can build our self-confidence as human beings on people we have never seen and are safe never to see. Well, that's what we've come to—we've learnt that much since your father and mother, and my father too for that matter, had such self-confidence in the people among whom they lived."

"Self-confidence in *others* among whom they lived—what do you mean by that?"

"Why yes—they were positive that if only every one else would think and believe as they did and act as they said they should, everything would be first-rate. It's precisely this sort of thing that I will *not* train up Anne in—she is not to rely on human self-confidence, either in myself or others."

"In other words—you will bring her up to rely solely on God?"

He nodded.

"Well, you know I can't go with you in that. But you were saying that nowadays we daren't any longer believe in others than those we are quite safe never to see—you haven't seen God, Sigurd! Presumably you believe now that you'll see him when you're dead. But if there is nothing after death, you won't even experience a disappointment. So for that matter it seems to me you might just as well believe in the classless society, or in Nordic Man—or in the spiritualists' doctrine that banality is stronger than death."

"We cannot see God, as you know. But we can become aware that God sees us. Christ—if we really read his testament to all men we are forced to admit that *he* has seen you and me and every one of us, he has seen us all exactly as we are."

Nathalie was silent for a few moments.

"So you intend to give your child a Christian education. Well, well. Though goodness knows if you'll succeed in *that*. Frankly, my impression is that this little Anne Nordgaard is not what one would call pious by nature. She strikes me as being a regular hale and hearty little devil."

He smiled faintly but said nothing.

"You talk about sin," said Nathalie quietly. "So I dare

say you think, Sigurd, that *we* were sinning—in behaving as we did *before* we had paid our visit to the mayor. Perhaps you think it ended so—miserably—because we had started it in that way?"

"Sin it was no doubt, but not in the way you mean—at that time I suppose neither you nor I imagined that we could ever—fail one another. We were to be together as long as we lived, we both meant that without the slightest doubt, and that is what matters, more than the forms and ceremonies of promising it. But I at any rate grew arrogant beyond all bounds, from the fact of getting you. I don't mean to say I wasn't immeasurably fond of you, for you know I was. But I noticed that you saw a great deal in me—that you idealized me, I may almost say. I knew that I was by no means the man I appeared to be in your eyes; on the contrary, I was a very ordinary fellow. But your being so much in love with me made me arrogant, so that I not only loved you, but in a way I was in love with myself at the same time—that is, with the image of myself that you had decked out——"

"Good heavens, Sigurd!" Nathalie smiled sadly. "At that rate all falling in love will be sinful!"

"Unless one can fall in love without this—self-deification, it must be so."

"Well, if there's such a thing as pious and legitimate love, it must be damned boring, in my opinion."

"I don't know very much about that, as I've never tried it. But I know that the other kind—the arrogant and self-admiring—ends in boredom."

Slowly Nathalie's face reddened deeply.

"At any rate you never told me *that* before. That I bored you."

"Are you crazy!" He too turned red. "I wasn't bored

with you! But you were rather bored with *me*, I couldn't help seeing that. I saw it more clearly than you did yourself, I believe, for of course I know you were still fond of me, but you no longer thought it so amusing to be so; and that was quite reasonable. And I was pretty sick of myself——"

Nathalie sat looking out of the window. The hanging twigs of the birches in the garden swayed in a glistening lacework with every puff of wind. In the vacant plot between the house and the neighbouring villa Anne and some bigger children were throwing stones at an old wooden butt which was floating in a big pool of water.

"I don't think it's just of you, Sigurd, to blame me for your having been so sick of yourself. I can't see that I ever gave you reason to suppose I was rather bored with you, as you say."

"There may have been this in it too, that I thought you had every reason to be. You had—overrated me so, to begin with. And you had started with such great expectations. I had been a fiasco. There was never any change for you—every day backwards and forwards to your business. The same thing over and over again. Even though we could still—mollify each other when we were together. And even so our whole life seemed to be getting congealed?"

Nathalie tossed her head impetuously. "That sounds as if you were positively cantankerous. That it was your vanity that—why are you smiling like that?"

"It was only that toss of the head when you get angry—it reminded me of when you were a girl, you had the same trick. Of course it was vanity. I realized that later, when I was alone. *Then* I began to understand what they meant when they talked about sin being the origin of all

the world's misfortunes—grandfather and Uncle Kristen and the rest of the—pietists, whom I used to make fun of like every one else. Though I was really fond of my mother's people. But in those days I didn't understand what they were talking about. Well, that too was vanity, of yet another kind—I took it for granted that father and Simen and Asmund must be right, since we Rafstad folk were reckoned among the big people of the neighbourhood, and Tangen was still a much smaller farm when I was a boy and used to row mother when she went across to see them. When you were there Uncle Kristen had cleared so much new land that it was more than double the size——"

Nathalie smiled. "So it's really Old Sjur Tangen who's succeeded in converting you at last, Sigurd?"

"You may put it that way if you like. At any rate I realized that even as a boy I had been arrogant over what was merely an illusion. For it was nothing else when I was proud of the fact that on our farm we didn't have to work ourselves to death as they did at Tangen, and we didn't *care* to worry ourselves as they did with thoughts of right and wrong and sin and grace and where do we come from and what are we striving for here on earth—— It was as if we were too superior to take things so seriously."

"You never felt altogether at home in town, Sigurd," said Nathalie after a pause. "I believe that was the main reason for your getting bored."

"That had something to do with it, yes."

"It's always the same story with you people." She was just going to toss her head again in the way he had smiled at, but checked herself. "You want to get away from the soil—but when you're in town you want to

have the right to be angry with town too——" On seeing him smile she said hotly: "But here now—God bless my soul, here it's neither real town nor real country—do you think you've found your right place here? Do you feel at home here?"

"The place is good enough. And I won't deny that I prefer having my own business to being employed by others."

"Yes, it's such a queer thing, that Christian humility—but that's your affair! Now. But supposing you had spoken out before—ten or five or six years ago—and we had made the experiment together, settled down in a small town, so that you could have started for yourself again, do you believe things wouldn't have smashed so badly with us——?"

"How do I know? In any case I couldn't have asked you to give up a position like yours—one you had entirely created for yourself by your own ability—secure and free and authoritative—to go off and try your luck with me, not knowing how it would turn out."

"Of course you could have! Times were still so good then that it would have been the easiest thing in the world for me to start something here. I might have worked with you in your business. For that matter—I could take it on even to-day. I have twenty-four years' experience, I've made a kind of name for myself in a way, and connexions of one sort of another—I should manage it all right!"

Again he blushed violently.

"You don't think anything of that sort, Thali! That I had any—sinister designs in asking you to come home with me?"

"Sinister designs!" She was half-way between laughter

and tears. "In God's name, what is it you call sinister designs? If you had thought now that perhaps we had not done with each other entirely after all, and that being so it would be *too* criminally stupid if we didn't admit it."

"*Now* I have less than ever to offer you. I started here from nothing less than four years ago—well, it's not doing so badly, but that's all. I have a child too, and you have good reason to be prejudiced against Anne. You don't think I would propose—after the way I behaved to you that time—that I would propose what in reality could only mean that you should come here and—help me to put my affairs straight again——?"

Nathalie sat quite still.

"No," she said in a low voice. "Of course. I know very well you would never do that. If it was only for the sake of—help. If you didn't—need me for other reasons."

"There couldn't be a question of anything else—now. Not that I don't think it was terrible about Sverre Reistad. I thought it was terrible when I saw it in the paper. And I understood too that it was natural—that you should join him, whom you knew to be reliable, and one of your own set, and you had been friends ever since you were children. You can understand my thinking it was natural that you went to him. And no worse than what I had done myself."

"Certainly it was terrible. But it was all over between Sverre and me some time before it happened." So she had told him after all. "It was a misunderstanding, our whole engagement. On both sides."

She cast down her eyes as she felt he was looking at her. If he doesn't say anything now, she thought, I shall be utterly miserable. It made her sick at heart too, merely to touch upon the subject of Sverre—and yet she would

gladly have known whether it had hurt him, whether it had hit him hard to know she was another's. Does he still care for me at all——? At that moment the front-door bell rang.

The lady who came sweeping in, with a huge grey deerhound at her heels, was small and slight and smart, about their age. She stopped abruptly:

"Oh, I beg pardon! I had no idea you had a visitor——!"

Sigurd introduced them—Fru Fjalstad, Fru Nordgaard. "Will you have some coffee, Ingjerd? I'm afraid it's cold by the way, but she'll have some more in the kitchen——"

They drank coffee again, and Fru Fjalstad chatted about her dog and Markusragga and the show. She seemed to know all about every single dog, their names and pedigrees. It was her brother who owned Lòvhaugen Feiom. Nathalie felt she couldn't bear her, though no doubt she was really quite nice.

"But I'm afraid I'll have to go." Sigurd looked at his watch. "I promised the chief physician to be at the hospital by four, it's about the diathermic installation——"

"Oh, have I been keeping you both——! And is Fru Nordgaard leaving this afternoon? Dear me, Sigurd, you might have told me it was inconvenient—I could quite well have come another time."

"But it wasn't at all, Ingjerd."

All three went out together. Fru Fjalstad chattered the whole time. She was a widow, Nathalie gathered, and her brothers and Sigurd shared a hut somewhere in the mountains. Fru Fjalstad's boys were so fond of Nordgaard. At the chemist's she said good-bye, she had to call there.

Sigurd walked with Nathalie the short distance to the hotel.

"Well, it was strange meeting you again, Thali."

"Yes, and you didn't get much pleasure out of it, as far as I could see," she said nervously.

"You mustn't say that. You know I'm thankful for having had the chance of talking to you again. Shall I be able to see you when you're up here another time?"

"If you care to, yes. But I haven't packed yet, so I must say good-bye now—good-bye, Sigurd, and thanks for to-day."

The whole sky was now a pale grey as Nathalie sat in the train going south. She got out her needlework and her cigarette-case—discovered that this was empty. The youngster had broken up all her cigarettes and she had forgotten to buy more. Well, she would have to wait till she went to the dining-car.

Ice was still lying at this end of the lake; it was dark and rotten, full of leads that reflected the pale sky. The wooded hills looked dark, and the fields frozen, with patches of snow which were gradually shrinking from the withered pasture; the ploughed land lay raw and black with water standing in the furrows. Rooks were everywhere—Sigurd and Fru Fjalstad had been talking about them: poison had been put out against the plague of rooks that spring, and a valuable dog had taken some of it——

It was really incredible that she should never have thought of this eventuality—that there might be a Fru Fjalstad for instance. Well, of course she knew nothing, it need not mean anything that they called each other by

their Christian names or that she came bouncing in on Sigurd to talk dog.

But naturally the place was a nest of gossip. Just like any other little town. And of course everybody knew of his affair with Adinda Gaarder. That sort of thing doesn't make a man less attractive—curiosity is an effective aphrodisiac. And now, when he was left so pathetically alone with that fair and appetizing youngster—it was obvious that there must be so many females ready to come and help him that they would positively form a queue. And now she had joined the queue—for that was evidently what she had done.

Now the question was—should she go ahead and see if she could elbow her way past all the other possible candidates? Or retire again——?

She wanted to laugh and she wanted to cry. That her recollections should be so persistent that her thoughts could never let go of Sigurd. Or perhaps *she* did not recollect. Had her memory been at work all the time, distilling a kind of intoxicating liquor from what she recollected and what she forgot of her life with Sigurd? Whereas Sigurd recollected, according to Kierkegaard's definition of the difference between recollection and memory. Recollection merely fluctuates between recollecting correctly or incorrently. In neither case is the result nearly so fine as memory.

She recollected the episode with Sverre and only hoped that in time she might forget it. In any case be able to forget much of it. It was brutal, but true—she even regarded his death from a purely egoistic point of view: will it be easier to forget my relations with him now that my accomplice is gone and I run no risk of meeting him unexpectedly, am not likely to hear about him—

except from mamma—and the dead are soon buried by silence? Or will the fact that he met his end such a short time after I had broken with him make it impossible to forget him——?

If it had been one of those accidents where there might have been the shadow of a doubt that it *was* an accident—that would have been another matter. He had done with her just as much as she had done with him; he could not deny that. Each was aware that the other had been cheating, and that they had realized this about themselves and each other, in any case since they had patched things up after that evening when Adinda Gaarder's death was in the papers. But all the same it was true that she had merely done with a lover whom she had unsuccessfully exerted herself to love, whereas Sverre had done with the great illusion of his life.

Phew, yes. That distorted white face of his, with no colour left except in the nose. That evening when she said at last, being so tired of their everlasting scenes that she no longer cared what she said:

"Of course I believe what you say—that you've been weaving so many romances all these years about what it would be like to have me, that you couldn't give in till you'd tried it. But now you've got your wish at last, and it's been a disappointment—we both know that, whether you think it's decent to admit it or not. It's only obstinacy that makes you go on harping about our getting married. In reality you shrink from the experiment as much as I do."

She dared not look at him after speaking her mind like this, and the strange emotion in his voice gave her the creeps——

"Talk about serious and honest women—it takes a lot

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"Talk about serious and honest women—it takes a lot

of seriousness and virtue to make any one as cynical as you can be, Nathalie."

She felt that the words went home, and answered idiotically:

"But you don't care for me any more, Sverre——"

"Don't I, by God! When one's so afraid of a person that one dreads having to meet her—isn't that caring?"

Gipsy or not—he was like a man who has been driven out with scorn and had the door slammed against his long nose—and hasn't the strength to bring himself to reason in the light of day. Oh, Sverre. It was painful to remember him, and it wasn't getting easier to forget him. It was such a pleasant friendship, and it ended so unhappily.

But an air liner crash in the South of France—that was an indubitable case of accident. There was a young couple on board, on their honeymoon, and an elderly American lady going to visit her children in Rome. And it was no earthly use her tormenting herself with reproaches for having assisted Sverre Reistad to make such a sad and sickening mess of things—— For that matter, he would certainly have righted himself again, as Sigurd said about his——. But it *feels* irreparable and irrevocable, when they die—he was right there.

So *he* evidently believed now in recognition, in some form or other, after death. That had always seemed to her an uncanny thought—she had never wished that there should be a life after death. It was not that she wasn't fond of a lot of people—but as for being so fond of them as to wish to spend a whole eternity in proper company—no. Well yes, if she had hated. Last night would no doubt have hoped for it in it, and he went off at it is a result of barrenness—some k in here he did nothing dread so many people have of the am——"

Sigurd had died while they were young, she would doubtless have tried to believe that he was still in existence somewhere, and that there must be some form of recognition.

And here she sat, not even knowing whether she wished to see him again in a fortnight. Oh yes, of course she did wish it. It was simply incredible—four years, that was nothing at their age, and yet a heap of rubble had accumulated between them which made the road impassable. Well, after all it had turned out that long before their separation he had drifted away from her, much farther than she suspected—or would understand.

She had never been jealous all the time they were married—and now she was in such a state that she looked with distrust and disapproval on every skirt that came near him—and on a lot more which perhaps did not even exist. But Sigurd, perhaps he felt in the same way—or else what he had heard about her and Sverre had killed what love of her he still felt when she sent him away to do his duty by the mother of his child, as mamma would have expressed it. No doubt she too had expressed it so for that matter. It was tolerably certain that he had gone through some hard times before reconciling himself to the thought that she was living with another man and was going to marry him.

Of course he knew as well as every one else that when a lady, a divorced wife into the bargain, has a more or less official affair of this sort, a whole swarm of men will be much her b-fore she knows where she is, offering their

She dared not hea vens, yes, even those two downright this, and the strangs lived on the floor below that first creeps—— ought there was something almost

"Talk about serious hey are, the whole male sex, each

imagining he's more of a man than all the other fellows, smothering their inferiority complexes in swagger and battling for their ambitions. But no sooner do they hear of a woman who takes kindly to *one* man's amorous intercourse than they come galloping up to try the effect of *their* advances—disclosing their secret democratic conviction that one man is as good as another. Or perhaps they think, I'm just as good at that as the best of them——

Oh no—it must be just the same with them as with the womenfolk—curiosity is a sovereign aphrodisiac. Sigurd after all was not so innocent that he didn't know *that*.

Even if things could be made what is called "good again" between them, it was by no means sure that they would be particularly good. But if she should see him disappear again, entirely out of her life—in such a way that she knew he was gone for good this time—then it would certainly not make her miserable for the rest of her days, but there would never again be any real savour in life.

Gunvor had tea for her when she reached home—and it could not be denied that her room was pretty and cosy, with only the one corner lighted up, and the scent and brightness of tulips coming from all the other dusky corners.

"May I come in, godmother?" cried the boy from the bedroom.

"Why, aren't you asleep yet, Knut?"

"It's so difficult to get him to go to sleep properly when he's by himself," Gunvor explained. "Last night he knew I was going to be with him, and he went off at once. But now when I was sitting in here he did nothing but ask when you'd be back, ma'am——"

The little figure in woollen combinations appeared in the doorway:

"Can I be-so-kind and come and have a tea-fish, godmother?"

"You really ought not to be allowed to."

The boy climbed up on to Nathalie's lap.

"Mamma sent you her love, Knut."

"Is she going to get well soon?" But it made no impression on him. He was allowed to take one of the little horseshoe rolls with lots of grey seeds on top which he liked so much, and after that he was allowed to take another.

He was much prettier than Sigurd's little girl—Knut was slightly built, but there was a supple grace in all his movements. His smooth nut-brown hair was thick and soft as silk, and his eyes were big and dark—they had a queer, indefinable grey tint now, but no doubt they would be golden brown like his father's when he grew bigger.

There was comfort in feeling this little body nestling so trustfully against her own; he was falling asleep now. She was immensely fond of this child.

The inordinate happiness which she had always imagined a woman must experience in feeling her own living child in her arms—this was no doubt right enough, but now and then that happiness is only so-so as time wears on. If she had had that child by Sverre that she had desired so intensely that once or twice she had almost had a hope of it—she must have been altogether frantic with happiness in the beginning. But afterwards it would only have made everything even worse and more difficult——

Knut was asleep. Nathalie carried him in and put him into the little cot which stood at the foot of her own bed.

He opened his eyes an instant, blinked sleepily at the nightlight—then stretched out his arms to her. Usually Nathalie had tried in the course of the winter to break him of some of this hankering for caresses, but she always kissed him good night.

Thank God, little Knut did not incite one to any indecent and sentimental fancies—he belonged as it were to a different human category from Sigurd. She was fond of him because he was such a sweet child, and because she had been charged with care and affection for him, from the time he was born.

CHAPTER TWO

IT was for Alfhild Totland's funeral that Nathalie made her next journey up-country. She had a telephone message from the sanatorium early one morning—Fru Totland had died during the night.

The little town smelt of sprouting birch-leaves and dusty streets, but up on the hillside it was still early spring, with deep, dirty snow in the woods and yellow ice at the bottom of the brimming streams that murmured and gurgled on every side.

The sunny slope of the churchyard at any rate was bare of snow, where the grave had been dug in frozen yellowish grey earth. But the warmth of the sun had thawed the lumps of clay thrown up around the hole so as to make them dark and moist. The blue sky was streaked with fine feathery clouds which the wind carried northward.

There was water at the bottom when papa was lowered into the black hole, Nathalie remembered—poor Alfhild was spared that, though it matters little what sort of a grave one is laid in; even those who believe in a life after death probably think the same.

For all that, one thinks to oneself—I should like to lie in a place as beautiful as this. The Stone Age idea that the dead dwell in their graves must have survived many changes of belief and a thousand years of Christianity—as a sentiment we still have it in us. Here I should like to be buried——

The churchyard stood high on a mound; it was quite new, there were only a few graves in it at present, and the birches that had been planted along the wall were quite young and slender. All that one saw from here was one wooded ridge behind another, and down in the hollow a snow-covered lake which stretched away to the northward with trees along its shores and little farms at its upper end. The sun-drenched air was filled with the murmur of the river below the church hill and the music of running water round about, and somewhere in the neighbourhood there was a soft, coy piping of bullfinches. Nathalie discovered the birds in a big tree just outside the churchyard wall; the male birds shone like roses on the bare branches.

Sigurd had come to the funeral, and Fru Fjalstad. She was dressed in the deepest mourning and she had cried in the chapel. After the ceremony she left the grave in company with someone from the sanatorium, and Sigurd came and spoke to Nathalie.

"Poor woman, I had no idea she was *so* young. Well, she didn't have a very easy life——"

"She was only nineteen when she started with us." The sexton was gathering up the wreaths that lay on the coffin. There were not many. The big one from the staff of House and Home which Nathalie had brought was already beginning to wither; the bunches of white lilac were hanging their heads. "And this is one of the things that make one feel one is getting on in years—one buries so many of one's friends."

"Yes. It's sad for that little boy of hers. The clergyman said something about her husband, that he was far away in a foreign land?"

"Tobben, yes, he's in Italy. A sister of his has a pension

at Fiesole, and when Alfhild had to leave home he went there. I dare say he'll be able to make himself useful—he's good at languages."

"Then the boy is still with you?"

"Yes, and I shall have to keep him too. I promised Alfhild I would. There's no one else to look after him. I didn't know Fru Fjalstad was a friend of Alfhild Totland?"

"She met her last autumn, she tells me, when she was visiting someone up at the sanatorium."

"I see—she was so overcome in the chapel that one would think she was the chief mourner——"

Sigurd smiled: "Oh well, Ingjerd is so easily moved."

"How old is she?" asked Nathalie.

"I'm sure I don't know. Her brother was at college with me; she's a few years older."

"Then she looks younger than her age," said Nathalie magnanimously.

"Yes, she's so small and graceful. Both her boys are taller than their mother, and neither of them is out of the lower school yet. She's very sweet, amusing too."

Fru Fjalstad came up at that moment:

"Oh, I always find funerals so affecting! Poor thing, how terribly lonely she was—dying like that, away from husband and child when she had both—Fru Nordgaard will drive back with us, won't she, Sigurd?"

"Yes—will you, Nathalie?"

"Thanks, but I have to go up to the sanatorium again; I expect I'll take the bus down."

"Oh well," said Sigurd, "my old tin can's not up to much with the road in this state, it's a regular swamp in places——"

"Oh, what a pity," said Fru Fjalstad. "I was thinking

you could both have dined with me—but can't you come to supper, I'll get hold of Jon and ask him to bring his violin—*must* you leave this afternoon? I'm so sorry, but next time you come, Fru Nordgaard?"

"Thank you, that's very kind. But I don't know now when I shall come here again. I have nothing to come for now that Fru Totland is dead, you see."

As they were about to say good-bye Nathalie remembered to ask: "How is Anne?"

"Oh, poor child, she's had an awful cold——" He launched into a lengthy description of the course of the illness.

"*Isn't* Anne charming?" exclaimed Fru Fjalstad jubilantly. "I've never seen such a splendid child, and so intelligent! Mine are both boys, you see; well, they're good enough, I don't mean that, but little girls always seem so much brighter——"

"I shall be going to Oslo next week," said Sigurd. "Do you mind if I come and look you up?"

"Dear me, no; I'll be glad to see you. Only ring up so that I'll be sure to be at home."

Sigurd was at the station when Nathalie was leaving, but she came late, there was only five minutes before the train started. And a moment later Fru Fjalstad burst upon them. She had brought flowers for Nathalie.

Nathalie placed the white lilac in the water tumbler in her carriage. The long wooden stalks did not fit very well. And when she had got as far as Jessheim they were so withered that she could throw them out of the window with a clear conscience.

It did not improve her temper to find the telegram

from her mother on arriving at home. Mamma announced her visit for Wednesday or Thursday. So tiresome—poor mamma couldn't get over her disappointment that nothing came of her marriage to Sverre. She and he had always been such good friends. But she really might leave off talking about it.

As for receiving Sigurd while she had mamma here, that she would not do. In that case she would prefer to suggest their meeting somewhere in town. For if she merely denied herself and gave no explanation, she was afraid he would make no further attempt to meet her.

But on Thursday Ragna telephoned that mamma had put off her trip to town till next week. So now she was waiting to hear from Sigurd. And when at last he rang up on the Friday she answered without more ado, she would be at home on Sunday afternoon.

It did not suit very well; it was Gunvor's afternoon off, so she would have to look after Knut herself; but she would not run any risk by proposing another time.

The whole thing was idiotic, for she didn't even know—he might easily take it in to his head to bring his friend Ingjerd. If Ingjerd wouldn't allow him to come here by himself. Nathalie gave herself an object-lesson by laying the tea-table for three.

The two little girls on the ground floor had promised to take Knut to St. Hans' Hill, but in their family they did not dine till five o'clock. So Knut was on the balcony when Sigurd arrived.

Knut never had to be told twice to come and say how-d'ye-do to visitors. He gave his hand cheerfully and bowed so nicely that it was a pleasure to watch him. Nathalie had a slight feeling of satisfaction—now she

could show Sigurd a well brought-up youngster. And at the same time there was a renewal of the shadow of aversion which she had always experienced on seeing how entirely the little boy entered into his part of the engaging child. Whether it was his nature or training—he had done so ever since he could stump about.

He answered Sigurd's questions—gave his name and his age. In speaking to strangers he had a slight lisp—it was becoming and gave him a droll air, but he never showed it with people he knew well. When Nathalie had poured out tea Knut was allowed to come and help himself to cake—he thanked her with a bow like a model child and retired at once to the balcony and his toys when told to by Nathalie.

"He calls you godmother?" said Sigurd.

"Yes, he was christened out in the country where he was born, and so I acted godmother."

"But surely he won't go on calling you that if you adopt him as your own?"

"Why not?" Involuntarily her voice grew sharp. "As I've never had a child of my own I won't have any one else's child calling me mother. And as for aunt, I'm so sick of being called Aunt Thali that I don't want any more nephews or nieces."

"But they were very fond of you, Thali, all the children who had you for an aunt."

"Yes, and I'm fond of them too, as you know. But in the case of this boy I have to try amongst other things to educate and support him. The other children have other people to do this. So for them I *mayn't* do any more than provide little extra gratifications. And of course it's a good thing I can do so."

Sigurd sat looking about him, rather bashfully.

"You've got a very nice place here, Nathalie. It reminds me rather of your old home."

"I was given some of mamma's furniture, she hasn't room for it all where she lives now." She wondered whether he recognized Sverre's little piano too. At that moment Sigurd smiled—it was at Knut; the boy had his nose pressed against the window-pane. On discovering that Nathalie was looking at him he gave his sweetest and most roguish smile and disappeared from view.

"He's a wonderfully bright little fellow, isn't he? Uncommonly nice-looking too."

"He seems very intelligent. But I don't know how much that may signify. His father's a pronounced neurasthenic. And possibly his mother was already attacked at the time of his birth; in any case it declared itself not long after—and her whole family is markedly tuberculous."

"Then it's a—difficult task you've undertaken with this boy?"

"If one is to adopt a strange child at all, it must be because it needs one. Otherwise it's probably more humane to provide oneself with a dog—for a lonely woman. But in Knut's case the only alternative was an orphanage."

"So Totland has entirely relinquished the boy?"

"He sends a picture post card now and again. But he's sure to find another wife to keep him before long. There were one or two ready to take him even before he was packed off to Italy. That's what it's come to, you know. The girls who have difficulty in keeping themselves have to be content with a lover now and then. If they want to marry they must be able to keep a man."

Sigurd had turned red—luckily the bell rang at that moment; it was the girls coming to fetch Knut. Nathalie

put on the boy's outdoor things. In his new spring coat and cap he looked like a charming doll.

It was very quiet after the children had gone. Without thinking, merely for the sake of doing something, Nathalie removed the unused cup and plate.

"Were you expecting someone else?" Sigurd asked in some surprise.

"I thought perhaps you might have Fru Fjalstad with you."

"Ingjerd?" he said, still more astonished. "Is *she* in town?"

"Not that I know of." She paused a moment. "I really had the impression that you two were—more or less inseparable."

He looked at her, shook his head slightly. "Then you were mistaken." But then he laughed: "Ingjerd, she's always so—enthusiastic. And she was so immensely fascinated with you that day she met you at my house."

"She's immensely fascinated with your daughter too. And with you as well, I'm sure."

Again he shook his head. "My dear Nathalie. Ingjerd Fjalstad belongs to—the smart set, I suppose one would call it—her family has always counted for a lot in the place. You know what that means in these small towns. She has money too. I'm a new-comer and everybody knows that I've turned up there on account of a scandal. And that I just manage to keep my head above water. Nils Thorsgaard, her brother, that is, has been friendly with me, and so has Ingjerd. But you mustn't get away with the idea that—Ingjerd Fjalstad is specially interested in me and my affairs."

"Sigurd——" Nathalie paused. "You are now nearer

fifty than forty. When you were younger this trick of yours became you very well—acting like the sweet and attractive girls of former days—always pretending when any one fell in love with you that you had no suspicion of anything of the sort——"

"Do *you* think I always did that?"

She blushed: "No, no. I ought of course to be flattered that you made an exception in my case."

"Exception. What if I did think now and again—in my younger days, I mean—that here was a chance of a little monkey business if I cared to take it—when the girl meant nothing much to me—— Why, you surely don't think, Thali, that any man has the heart to let slip an opportunity of—making a conquest let us call it, to use a polite word? If so you're more innocent than I thought. With you it was different. I wanted you more than anything in the world, so naturally I did all I could to get you as soon as possible."

"Oh yes." Her hands made a helpless gesture in her lap. "And I suppose I ought to be glad that we were happy as long as we were. At any rate it was a good while before you got sick of me."

"You know very well that it wasn't that."

"Oh yes, it was, Sigurd. Even if after the event you have made up a sort of—religious explanation for it. Some of it is true, I know that. You were lowered in your own eyes by being dependent on your wife, and by not having children. So long as you could not be sure it was not your fault."

"Of course there was some truth in that too. That I seemed always destined to be the outdoor lad."

"Outdoor lad?"

"It's a saying they have in the country—indoor lad

and outdoor lad. The indoor lad was Simen first, and afterwards Asmund. The outdoor lad was me."

"It was this peasant's touchiness of yours that I didn't realize enough to take seriously."

"All the same it wasn't that—though perhaps that was the immediate pretext for my going in search of adventures. But the fact of the matter is, Thali, that every man desires a woman, a wife, whom he can love and be faithful to as long as they live. Most men do, in any case. I believe, too, that if any men don't desire this it is because they have resigned, whether they know it or not. Some boys resign even before they are big enough to have anything to do with the girls—when times are so bad that they have no prospects, or when they see a hopeless state of things at home, or have been brought up to distrust that part of their instincts. All the same I believe they will have to fill up a pretty big hole in themselves with phrases and theories before they cease to feel this—yearning for fidelity. But when we have got the one whom we know we shall never be done with, because we cannot be, then at times there comes over us this hankering to try if we cannot after all. By way of a change. And then it is easy enough to find opportunities and pretexts for a little infidelity now and again."

"If you think it's like that," said Nathalie in a low voice, "then Anne's mother was even more to be pitied than I knew."

"Yes, she was. For that reason you mustn't imagine I'm thinking of—inseparable friendships any more. It will never be that, Thali. I must take the consequences of my actions and try to do all I can to make Anne's life happy and comfortable. As to your forgiveness—you know very well I should like to ask that. But it would

undo nothing of what has been done. If only I had not deceived you for so long that at last you discovered for yourself that you had relied on a man who was altogether untrustworthy. So there is nothing strange in your being so—irreconcilable."

"Am *I*—irreconcilable?"

"You've been so—snappish—and aggressive all the time. Both at our last meeting and to-day."

"Have I? Couldn't you imagine, Sigurd, that I am—perhaps rather bitter because you *don't* say, I regret? I don't mean anything about sin and forgiveness of sins—I expect you believe God has forgiven you your sin by now. But supposing I had been hoping you would say, in all simplicity—'oh, Nathalie, I'm sorry I was so stupid as to pull down all that we two had built up for so many years. It was foolish, and it was odious of me to deceive you so long as to make it irreparable.'" With a rapid, angry gesture she dried her eyes and looked at him in challenge.

"Yes, that's what it is," he said quietly. "That's what's so—bad. God's forgiveness, you say; yes, I do believe in that. But sometimes it's difficult to be satisfied with that, when I know that I can't undo the wrong I've done to others. To you and to Adinda. Her parents suffered too. And little Anne—for I know I'm a fairly unsatisfactory father. Though in Anne's case—at any rate I can try to teach her that one is not to put one's trust in human beings. And her mother and her people, probably none of them ever had any—fancies of this sort. So their case is not so hopeless, when one comes to think of it."

"Well, talking about fancies——" Nathalie smiled sarcastically. "You know, there's nothing very new in a

man being unfaithful to his wife. So it wasn't that. Though to be sure I had thought the relations between you and me were more—firmly based than they turned out to be. Sometimes I almost think the most intolerable part of it was the discovery I made afterwards about myself—that I too was very different from what I had believed. But I dare say you think that shockingly arrogant and ungodly?"

"You never professed to believe in any God, though. You can understand my present feeling that it was only natural we should end in a smash. Well, I don't mean to say that my deceiving you was necessary exactly—I'm not putting it forward as an excuse. We might have gone on deceiving ourselves, have lived comfortably enough together without finding out any more about our real natures, and been fond of one another so far as we knew one another. I know very well there are many people who live happily together, without going in for any triangles or quadrangles or other geometrical figures, even if they are not Christians. But all the same, any success of this sort must depend so much upon—chance, if one ignores the—most essential realities with which one is surrounded."

"Realities, you say—isn't it rather wish-fulfilment dreams, your whole religion?"

Sigurd smiled faintly.

"I've heard that too, that about wish-fulfilment. Believed it even—so long as I positively did not wish that there should be a God or anything after death, but rather the reverse. Then I too hoped that all this might be dreams and fiction. Yes—I called it wish-fulfilment dreams. And tell me honestly, Nathalie—do you think that many of the people you have known who say they

don't believe in God, do you think they *wish* him to exist, and to be the reality that encloses all other existence like a hand, and not something which we wish or imagine able to help us to slip out between his fingers?"

"It is true that God is not *my* wish-fulfilment dream. But from the way you talk about it, Sigurd, I can't see what *joy* you can get out of being a Christian in this way. People talk about the consolations of religion——"

He laughed and shook his head.

"I don't think you're at all religious by nature," she went on. "Country folk in general haven't much of a turn that way, that's my impression. In reality you've always wanted to establish a kind of agreement with the Almighty. You agree to acknowledge his jurisdiction and to do this and that, and in return he is to undertake certain obligations towards you—here and hereafter. Take Adinda Gaarder, for instance—was her religion any more than that in reality? My impression of her was that she was a self-willed and rather pert young woman who did as she pleased, until she came up against—barriers which she was accustomed to look upon as insurmountable."

"I talked very little to her about these questions, as you may imagine. But it's true that she was self-willed—perhaps not more than other people. But she gave one that idea—just because she believed God to be real and personal, so that she could love him and rebel when new feelings clashed with old feelings, and when her own will took another direction than that she believed to be God's will. But you see, I didn't understand her either, until she had gone home, when she wrote me two or three letters—the last one after Anne was born. I talked to her father too one day——

"——You may be right in saying that by *nature* you for instance are much more religious than any of us."

"I!"

"Yes—you are much readier to be as you think it's right to be, and to do what you believe you ought to do, whether you like it or not. But it's true, Nathalie. I never thought of it before. You are actually—more loyal to what you were brought up to believe in than most Christians are to God. And this in spite of your constantly criticizing those who taught you and having so little confidence in what they preached. Isn't that what constitutes natural piety?"

"Piety or stupidity." She was on the point of tears. "I'm inclined to think it comes to the same thing. For that matter—I never thought of letting you know it, but now you can hear it all the same: this piety of mine, such as it was, only lasted as long as my happiness. When that was over—I was alone, and I was fairly bitter. I don't care to talk about it, but that affair of Sverre and me, that wasn't at all edifying, let me tell you——" She jumped up, went to the balcony door and stood with her back to the light.

His face looked so strange now—pale, and with a rigid expression.

"What did you really think when you heard about Sverre and me?"

"I thought," he said in a low, restrained voice, "——I knew of course that Reistad had always—admired you. So it was not unnatural that you—attached yourself to a man who really—appreciated you as you deserved. And then you and he had many interests in common——"

Nathalie laughed loudly.

"Interests in common is good! They have a lot to do

with love—you and I, we hadn't many interests in common, had we! Weren't you even jealous, Sigurd?"

"Jealous!" He laughed dryly. "I should say I was! More than one cares to talk about. But I could only—I knew I was getting just what I'd deserved."

"Would you wish it could be undone?" she asked in desperation. "That all that——" she flung out her hands in a helpless gesture. "Sigurd, do you never wish you could get me back?"

"Do I wish——" He was so pale that he looked ill. "I know how impossible it is. I have now less than ever to offer another. It would be such a hard and narrow life, especially for one accustomed to something very different. You can guess I've been thinking of what you said—about being able to get on wherever you were—and I'm quite ready to believe it. But you may be sure, I won't have that. You said just now that if a woman wants to get married nowadays she must be able to keep her husband——"

"And you won't have a wife unless you're able to keep her. But isn't that vanity and arrogance? How do you reconcile it with Christian humility?"

He smiled faintly. "Oh, there are many things I think and do which don't square very well with—the nature of Christ. But the situation is this: I have a child now, and you have adopted one. Supposing I were bold enough to ask if you could think of anything of this sort, I must first be in such a position that you would not have to take upon yourself more than the home—and the children——"

Nathalie gave a short laugh.

"That girl of yours, by the way, had an altogether instinctive hostile feeling for me—I noticed that all right."

"Oh—Anne's never very quick at taking to strangers."

"She didn't like me. And I'm not sure that it isn't mutual."

"You would never be capable of being unkind to a child, Thali," he said quickly. "I know you well enough for that."

"I don't suppose I should. But not unkind—that's not enough, Sigurd, where a child's concerned. So you have thought about it?" she asked softly. "Have you? Thought sometimes that you could wish I was with you, and we were married again, as in old days?"

"You know that very well." Again he smiled, that strange sad smile. "If you hadn't known it you wouldn't have asked that, Thali. I have never ceased to be fond of you, and you have never had a doubt of that."

She stood with her back to the balcony, waiting breathlessly. Now he must come and take me in his arms——

But he sat still. And at last he went and sat down on the sofa, at the other end of the room.

"Tell me, Sigurd—— Have you ever—prayed to God that you might get me back?"

"Perhaps I have done that too."

"Perhaps—then don't you know?"

"There are so many sorts of praying. Sometimes of course one has one's own definite wishes, also while one is praying. But as for—sending up requisitions to heaven, that's not praying. Since we must pray in Jesus' name, and then it won't do to pray contrary to God's will."

"And you believe it's contrary to God's will that you and I should come together?"

"No, why should it be?" He was silent for a moment. "If my affairs should get on so that it wouldn't mean

your having to make too disproportionate a sacrifice—and you could still think of trying such a venture——"

"No, look here, Sigurd! That's a disproportionately vague project—for all the fuss of getting married over again and the rest of it." She laughed excitedly. "Do you remember something you said once, when you and Asmund were talking? Living together and working together must become impossible in the long run, you said, between those who believe in God and those who think there's no one who worries about human beings, except human beings themselves——?"

"Did I say that? I don't remember. But I know I've thought something of the sort at times."

The garden gate clicked; Nathalie heard Knut talking to the little girls outside.

"If you could get rid of all that —your faith, I mean, God, who doesn't seem to have treated you very pleasantly after all, as far as I can see—and get back all that you and I once shared? Wouldn't you make the change?"

"No," he said quietly.

She struck her hands together, locking her fingers together, drew them apart and struck them together again.

"I love you much better than that, Thali."

"I don't care for you to love me in some new way. I want it to be as it has been."

She heard the toes of Knut's little shoes against the door of the flat—the child was stretching up and trying to ring for himself.

"But that's what is impossible, Nathalie," said Sigurd; but at that moment she swept past him to open the door for Knut.

She warmed some milk for the boy and got ready his supper. While he was eating—Nathalie had not yet succeeded in getting Knut to eat unless somebody made a fuss of him meanwhile—Sigurd took his departure. She did not try to detain him, she was so dispirited and embittered.

She had been prepared for his staying to supper. But when she had put Knut to bed she only took a cup of tea in the kitchen. As she sat drinking it she began to cry at every moment.

Afterwards she continued to walk up and down her room—quite noiselessly on the thick carpet. The evening was so light—she moved to the balcony and sat there.

The old elms outside the house were pale green with the keys that clustered on every twig, only the ends of the branches were tipped with dark leaves. In the neglected patch of garden below some small beds were bright with hyacinths—the little girls of the ground floor had each made her little garden among the wild grass of the lawn.

The sky was white, and the big cream-coloured block at the corner shone as with a reflection of the day's sunlight. But little by little the elms grew dark, till their network of branches was outlined against the pale sky.

She had already planted her flower-boxes some time ago. Suddenly her whole being rose in revolt against this monotonous well-ordered life which she had assumed would go on indefinitely—the planted flower-boxes were witness to it, so were her rooms, so was everything. She had already begun to think, where should she go for her holiday with Knut?—wasn't the boy too nervous to be taken to the seaside?

——But it was perfectly insane—when she was fond

of him, and he of her. He was—if you hadn't known it you would never have asked it, Thali, he said. Of course he was right there.

That he should shrink from asking her to give up the secure existence she had created for herself—there was nothing strange in that from his point of view. He couldn't tell how sick she was of it all. She had only to think of what mamma and Ragna would say, if they heard that she had given up her position in House and Home and gone off, with an adopted child into the bargain, to begin at the beginning again, by the side of Sigurd.

Beginning over again was nonsense, though; she had her name, her experience and connexions——

It would be difficult, it would be difficult—oh yes, no doubt of that. But she had had difficulties before, of other kinds. It would be amusing to try a new sort of difficulty. It was a shame though, for her to talk about difficulties, in times like these—with all the resources she had, after her years of work.

Nathalie began to walk up and down the room again. No, of course he was right in saying it was impossible to reconstruct what had been. Besides, it had never been as she imagined it, that time when she felt secure of herself and of him. And they could not disavow the lives they had led apart in these last years.

This soft carpet, the quiet and subdued period setting, the old French walnut-wood bed in the next room—all this in itself reminded her of her false step with Sverre and of the ruin it had brought about, both for him and for her. And Sigurd had that little girl, as an everlasting reminder of his flight from a happiness in which he could not feel really at home.

But still it must be better for them to join their for-

tunes—to patch their rags together, they might well call it—and face the problem of the two children together. Rather than each sitting alone on a solitary perch with the fuss of bringing up a child single-handed. In Sigurd's case, however he might resolve to bring up his daughter in godliness and contentment, it would never come to anything but everlasting gentle admonitions to which the child would scarcely listen, and a smiling admiration of Anne. And she had taken upon herself to foster a boy who was nervous and seemed born with a desire to please—and theories and prescriptions for dealing with problem-children of this sort are of precious little use when they have to be applied to a living human seedling of flesh and blood and nerves. No doubt Anne and Knut could knock each other into some sort of shape much better than any grown-up could manage it.

God in heaven—if one once accepts the point of view that people who have not the same beliefs about first and last things cannot help each other in *anything*—then all is hopeless in this world. Often as she might run her head against Sigurd's new faith—and it would often make her angry, sad, bewildered—she would have to take life as it came. If she could not live without him she would have to put up with his turning Christian. She would have taken him back, even if he had turned theosophist or spiritualist. Though spiritualist—no, she jibbed at that. Better that he should believe the dead are in God's hand, and he does not let them loose to get into fatuous conversation with the living.

When all is said and done, two people can be so fond of each other as to believe they possess and know the other wholly and can give the other the whole of themselves. This is only an illusion, as she had now found out. So

far as she could understand, Sigurd believed there was something ultimate and intangible in a human being, which could not be reached by any other, and it was there that God and man met. Well, she could imagine more unpleasant hypotheses.

He was going by the Stockholm train, so Nathalie set her alarm clock at seven to make sure, though she was not afraid of oversleeping herself. And she woke in good time, silenced the alarm and was able to dress in the good morning stillness which was only broken by the chirping of sparrows in the garden and the rising and fading roar whenever a tramcar passed along Ullevaal road.

She made herself as attractive as she could. As she gave the last touches to her black, grey-streaked hair, she could not help laughing—fancy Sigurd's imagining there was a reddish shade in the dye she used in old days. If it came to that, what sort of an image of her did he carry in his mind——? That is one of the things people never get to know about one another.

The hall-porter at his hotel answered the telephone: yes Herr Nordgaard was in the breakfast-room—should he send for him? "No, thanks, it's not necessary. If you'll just tell him Fru Nordgaard's coming down, so we can go to the station together."

Now just stop thinking, she said to herself as she sat in the taxi. Her hands were cold with excitement. Now it was no longer any use changing one's mind——

He stood on the pavement outside the hotel, with a coat over his arm and a suit-case in his hand. Nathalie jumped out of the taxi and paid.

The quiet side street shone grey and dry in the morning sun. At its end some old horse-chestnuts raised their

swelling crowns of pale-green foliage against the blue sky.

"Good morning, Sigurd—but bless my heart, how tired you look, as if you hadn't slept all night," she said gaily.

"It's not so bad as all that. I lay awake thinking of our talk yesterday. And when the porter said you had rung up——"

"Yes—how stupid of me, we might have taken the taxi on to the station—however, you're in such good time——"

They crossed a little square. Unhealthy little lime-trees fenced round with wire threw shadows on the bluish shingle—they were pretty all the same, while the leaves were so new as to be quite transparent.

"I've been thinking about it all night too, Sigurd. And if you're prepared to chance it, I'm ready. To start afresh." He stopped, and on seeing the look in his face she went on with all haste: "It isn't self-sacrifice or anything of that sort, you understand, it's what I wish more than anything in the world."

He said breathlessly:

"I'm so fond of you, Nathalie—if I could only tell you how fond I am of you. I simply can't understand that you can still care for me enough to——"

They stood looking at one another for an instant, until she laughed. Then he put his arm round her, quickly and awkwardly, and his face came close to hers—the bewilderment of his hot and hurried kiss shook her like an earthquake—and then, with all the baggage held in his other arm, it was so comic and so clumsy——

"Are you crazy, man, in the middle of the street," she laughed and was afraid she might burst out crying.

"If I only knew for sure that you will never regret it," he said, as they walked on again. He shifted his suit-case and coat to the other arm and took her hand.

"Oh nonsense, it's not my way to regret!" She became serious all at once, clasped his hand tightly. "That's boasting though. I have learnt to regret very thoroughly of late, but this I shall never regret. Do you hear, Sigurd? I'm not as I used to be, you see, I've grown much more—impatient and hot-tempered; you may have a good deal to put up with at times. But even if I should sometimes be quarrelsome and vicious—you must never, never think it's because I regret *this*!"

He shook his head:

"Vicious—you will never be that. I know you well enough for that. Temperament—you have always had." He squeezed her hand.

She walked silently by his side looking at all the steamers along the quay. They gleamed in the sun and were noisy, from some of their funnels a column of smoke rose, making the blue air quiver. Has he forgotten how vicious I have been, or did he never realize that I was so? she thought. We who have loved one another such an infinite time and are forced to go on loving one another—what do we know of each other? The thought filled her with a boundless feeling of bitter-sweetness. It was resignation, but she knew for certain that it was resignation in the face of happiness. Happiness one must take as it is——

"Oh no, Thali. I only wish——"

"What do you wish?" she asked uneasily.

"That you may be happy. In old days I had such confidence in myself. I thought it quite natural that you were fond of me. Well, no, not that," he laughed. "I thought

in those days that I had got a sweetheart that no man in the world deserved to have!"

"There won't be quite so much—gilt on everything now, Sigurd. But I think—— Then you know, there are the children. We can manage them better when there are two of us—and there will be two of them to bear the blunders we're sure to commit in dealing with them."

"For Knut and Anne it will certainly be better to have each other's company. If only it won't be too much for you——"

They walked through the hall of the station.

"Have you got your ticket?"

He nodded. "The thing is that if I don't go to-day I shall have to go all the way to Stockholm to see this engineer. On Mondays he's at the factory at Arvika, and we made an appointment to meet there to-day."

"It's this hospital installation, isn't it?"

They had very good time. They strolled along the platform, out into the sunshine. The rails gleamed against the black ground, but in one place Nathalie saw some bog-cotton growing—its withering heads nodded between the rails of a siding. Above the coal-smoke, the sharp smell of which was in their nostrils, and the puffs of white steam rose the ridge of Ekeberg, its sides clad in the light green of new foliage and its crest tufted with dark pine-trees against the sun-drenched morning sky.

"But you haven't put your things into a carriage," she said, as he stopped and kissed her.

"Yes, you're right—I didn't think of that——"

They went back to the train, which stood disgorging black smoke. The long row of carriages was already glistening in the sunshine so that one could see what a warm journey it would be to-day.

A man bowed to them as Sigurd jumped on to the step: "So you're travelling too to-day—it doesn't look as if there'd be many passengers——" They got in together.

"Who was that?" asked Nathalie when Sigurd came out again.

"We met him at Gratangen—that tourist station we came to from Harstad. We sat with him in the evening—he told us a lot about routes and so on. Do *you* remember what his name was—I can't think of it——"

Nathalie shook her head. "I remember his face now you tell me."

"Take your seats, take your seats," cried the guard, passing along the train.

"Isn't your wife coming with you, Nordgaard?" asked the man from Gratangen. "Aren't you coming, Fru Nordgaard?"

"Not to-day, no," cried Nathalie with a smile. She stood waving till the train turned into the curve.

He evidently doesn't know we have been divorced, she thought, as she began to walk back through the hall. How should he, though?

She stood on the pavement waiting while the water-cart spirted past, sending up a fresh summery smell of wet street-dust. Then she stayed a little while longer, faint with happiness and trepidation.

Never in this world shall I regret it, she thought. However it may turn out—at any rate it will be better than anything else. She had time to cross the market-place and look at the flowers—strange to think that next year she would no longer be here in town. The market, that's one of the things I shall miss.

Sigurd—— She laughed quietly. Perhaps he is

thanking the Almighty at this moment—the Guardian of all fools. And that at any rate I can almost understand. If he is only half as bewildered and half as happy as I am, I'm sure it must be fine to have someone to thank.